

THE
WOMAN WHO HAD
IMAGINATION

and other Stories by

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To
David Garnett

THE
WOMAN WHO HAD
IMAGINATION

THE LILY

My great-uncle Silas used to live in a small stone reed-thatched cottage on the edge of a pine-wood, where nightingales sang passionately in great numbers through early summer nights and on into the mornings and often still in the afternoons. On summer days after rain the air was sweetly saturated with the fragrance of the pines, which mingled subtly with the exquisite honeysuckle scent, the strange vanilla heaviness from the creamy elder-flowers in the garden hedge and the perfume of old pink and white crimped-double roses of forgotten names. It was very quiet there except for the soft, water-whispering sound of leaves and boughs, and the squabbling and singing of birds in the house-thatch and the trees. The house itself was soaked with years of scents, half-sweet, half-dimly-sour with the smell of wood smoke, the curious odour of mauve and milk-coloured and red geraniums, of old wine and tea and the earth smell of my uncle Silas himself.

It was the sort of house to which old men retire to enjoy their last days, in which, shuffling about in green carpet-slippers, they do nothing but poke the fire, gloomily clip their beards, read the newspapers with their spectacles on upside down, take too much physic and die of boredom at last.

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But my uncle Silas was different. At the age of ninety-three he was as lively and restless as a young colt. He shaved every morning at half-past five with cold water and a razor older than himself which resembled an antique barbaric bill-hook. He still kept alive within him some gay, devilish spark of audacity which made him attractive to the ladies. He ate too much and he drank too much.

'God strike me if I tell a lie,' he used to say, 'but I've drunk enough beer, me boyo, to float the fleet and a drop over.'

I remember seeing him on a scorching, windless day in July. He ought to have been asleep in the shade with his red handkerchief over his old walnut-coloured face, but when I arrived he was at work on his potato-patch, digging steadily and strongly in the full blaze of the sun.

Hearing the click of the gate he looked up, and seeing me, waved his spade. The potato-patch was at the far end of the long garden, where the earth was warmest under the woodside, and I walked down the long path to it between rows of fat-podded peas and beans and green-fruited bushes of currant and gooseberry. By the house, under the sun-white wall, the sweet-williams and white pinks flamed softly against the hot marigolds and the orange poppies flat-opened to drink in the sun.

'Hot,' I said.

'Warmish.' He did not pause in his strong, rhyth-

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mical digging. The potato-patch had been cleared of its crop and the sun-withered haulms had been heaped against the hedge.

'Peas?' I said. The conversation was inevitably laconic.

'Taters,' he said. He did not speak again until he had dug to the edge of the wood. There he straightened his back, blew his nose on his red handkerchief, let out a nonchalant flash of spittle, and cocked his eye at me.

'Two crops,' he said. 'Two crops from one bit o' land. How's that, me boyo? Ever heard talk o' that?' 'Never.'

'And you'd be telling a lie if you said you had. Because I know you ain't.'

He winked at me, with that swift cock of the head and the perky flicker of the lid that had in it all the saucy jauntiness of a youth of twenty. He was very proud of himself. He was doing something extraordinary and he knew it. There was no humbug about him.

Sitting in the low shade of the garden hedge I watched him, waiting for him to finish digging. He was a short, thick-built man, and his old corduroy trousers concertina-folded over his squat legs and his old wine-red waistcoat ruckled up over his heavy chest made him look dwarfer and thicker still. He was as ugly as some old Indian idol, his skin walnut-stained and scarred like a weather-cracked apple, his cheeks

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hanging loose and withered, his lips wet and almost sensual and a trifle sardonic with their sideways twist and the thick pout of the lower lip. His left eye was bloodshot, a thin vein or two of scarlet staining the white, but he kept the lid half-shut, only raising it abruptly now and then with an odd cocking-flicker that made him look devilish and sinister. The sudden gay jaunty flash of his eyes was electric, immortal. I told him once that he'd live to be a thousand. 'I shall,' he said.

When he had finished the digging and was scraping the light sun-dry soil from his spade with his flattened thumb I got up languidly from under the hedge.

'Don't strain yourself,' he said.

He shouldered his spade airily and walked away towards the house and I followed him, marvelling at his age, his strength and his tirelessness under that hot sun. Half-way up the garden path he stopped to show me his gooseberries. They were as large as young green peaches. He gathered a handful, and the bough, relieved of the weight, swayed up swiftly from the earth. When I had taken a gooseberry he threw the rest into his mouth, crunching them like a horse eating fresh carrots. Something made me say, as I sucked the gooseberry:

'You must have been born about the same year as Hardy.'

'Hardy?' He cocked his bloodshot eye at me. 'What Hardy?'

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'Thomas Hardy.'

He thought a moment, crunching gooseberries.

'I recollect him. Snotty little bit of a chap, red hair, always had a dew-drop on the end of his nose. One o' them Knotting Fox Hardies. Skinny lot. I recollect him.'

'No, not him. I mean another Hardy. Different man.'

'Then he was afore my time.'

'No, he was about your time. You must have heard of him. He wrote books.'

The word finished him: he turned and began to stride off towards the house. 'Books,' I heard him mutter. 'Books!' And suddenly he turned on me and curled his wet red lips and said in a voice of devastating scorn, his bloodshot eye half-angry, half-gleeful:

'I daresay.' And then in a flash: 'But could he grow gooseberries like that?'

Without pausing for an answer he strode off again, and I followed him up the path and out of the blazing white afternoon sun into the cool, geranium-smelling house, and there he sat down in his shirt-sleeves in the big black-leathered chair that he once told me his grandmother had left him, with a hundred pounds sewn in the seat that he sat on for ten years without knowing it.

'Mouthful o' wine?' he said to me softly, and then before I had time to answer he bawled into the silence of the house:

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'Woman! If you're down the cellar bring us a bottle o' cowslip!'

'I'm upstairs,' came a voice.

'Then come down. And look sloppy.'

'Fetch it yourself!'

'What's that, y'old tit? I'll fetch you something you won't forget in a month o' Sundays. D'ye hear?' There was a low muttering and rumbling over the ceiling. 'Fetch it yourself,' he muttered. 'Did ye hear that? Fetch it yourself!'

'I'll fetch it,' I said.

'You sit down,' he said. 'What do I pay a house-keeper for? Sit down. She'll bring it.'

I sat down in the broken-backed chair that in summer time always stood by the door, propping it open. The deep roof dropped a strong black shadow across the threshold but outside the sun blazed unbrokenly, with a still, intense mid-summer light. There was no sound or movement from anything except the bees, droll and drunken, as they crawled and tiptoed down the yellow and blue and dazzling white throats of the flowers. And sitting there waiting for the wine to come up, listening to the bees working down into the heart of the silence, I saw a flash of scarlet in the garden, and said:

'I see the lily's in bloom.'

And as though I had startled him Uncle Silas looked up quickly, almost with suspicion.

'Ah, she's in bloom,' he said.

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I was wondering why he always spoke of the lily as though it were a woman, when the housekeeper, her unlaced shoes clip-clopping defiantly on the wooden cellar-steps and the brick passage, came in with a green wine-bottle, and slapping it down on the table went out again with her head stiffly uplifted, without a word.

‘Glasses!’ yelled my uncle Silas.

‘Bringing ’em if you can wait!’ she shouted back.

‘Well, hurry then! And don’t fall over yourself!’

She came back a moment or two later with the glasses, which she clapped down on the table just as she had done the wine-bottle, defiantly, without a word. She was a scraggy, frosty-eyed woman, with a tight, almost lipless mouth, and as she stalked out of the door my uncle Silas leaned across to me and said in a whisper just loud enough for her to hear:

‘Tart as a stick of old rhubarb.’

‘What’s that you’re saying?’ she said at once.

‘Never spoke. Never opened me mouth.’

‘I heard you!’

‘Go and put yourself in curling pins, you old straight hook!’

‘I’m leaving,’ she shouted.

‘Leave!’ he shouted. ‘And good riddance.’

‘Who’re you talking to, eh? Who’re you talking to, you corrupted old devil? You ought to be ashamed of yourself! If you weren’t so old I’d warm your breeches till you couldn’t sit down. I’m off.’

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She flashed out, clip-clopping with her untied shoes along the passage and upstairs while he chanted after her, in his devilish, goading voice:

'Tart as a bit of old rhubarb, tart as a bit of old rhubarb!'

When the house was silent again he looked at me and winked his bloodshot eye and said 'Pour out', and I half-filled the tumblers with the clear sun-coloured wine. As we drank I said, 'You've done it now', and he winked back at me again, knowing that I knew that she had been leaving every day for twenty years, and that they had quarrelled with each other day and night for nearly all that time, secretly loving it.

Sitting by the door, sipping the sweet, cold wine, I looked at the lily again. Its strange, scarlet, turk's-cap blossoms had just begun to uncurl in the July heat, the colour hot and passionate against the snow-coloured pinks and the cool larkspurs and the stiff spikes of the madonnas, sweet and virgin but like white wax. Rare, exotic, strangely lovely, the red lily had blossomed there, untouched, for as long as I could remember.

'When are you going to give me a little bulb off the lily?' I said.

'You know what I've always told you,' he said. 'You can have her when I'm dead. You can come and dig her up then. Do what you like with her.'

I nodded. He drank, and as I watched his skinny throat filling and relaxing with the wine I said:

'Where did you get it? In the first place?'

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He looked at the almost empty glass.

'I pinched her,' he said.

'How?'

'Never mind. Give us another mouthful o' wine.'

He held out his glass, and I rose and took the wine-bottle from the table and paused with my hand on the cork. 'Go on,' I said, 'tell me.'

'I forget,' he said. 'It's been so damn long ago.'

'How long?'

'I forget,' he said.

As I gave him back his wine-filled glass I looked at him with a smile and he half-smiled back at me, half-cunning, half-sheepish, as though he knew what I was thinking. He possessed the vividdest memory, a memory he often boasted about as he told me the stories of his boyhood, rare tales of prize-fights on summer mornings by isolated woods very long ago, of how he heard the news of the Crimea, of how he took a candle to church to warm his hands against it in the dead of winter, and how when the parson cried out 'And ye shall see a great light, even as I see one now!' he snatched up the candle in fear of hell and devils and sat on it. 'And I can put my finger on the spot now.'

By that smile on his face I knew that he remembered about the lily, and after taking another long drink of the wine he began to talk. His voice was crabbed and rusty, a strong, ugly voice that had no softness or tenderness in it, and his half-shut bloodshot eye and his wet curled lips looked rakish and wicked, as though he were

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acting the villainous miser in one of those travelling melodramas of his youth.

'I seed her over in a garden, behind a wall,' he said. 'Big wall, about fifteen feet high. We were banging in hard a-carrying hay and I was on the top o' the cart and could see her just over the wall. Not just one — scores, common as poppies. I felt I shouldn't have no peace again until I had one. And I nipped over the wall that night about twelve o'clock and ran straight into her.'

'Into the lily?'

'Tah! Into a gal. See? Young gal — about my age, daughter o' the house. All dressed in thin white. "What are you doing here?" she says, and I believe she was as frit as I was. "I lost something," I says. "It's all right. You know me." And then she wanted to know what I'd lost, and I felt as if I didn't care what happened, and I said, "Lost my head, I reckon." And she laughed, and then I laughed and then she said, "Ssshhh! Don't you see I'm as done as you are if we're found here? You'd better go. What did you come for anyway?" And I told her. She wouldn't believe me. "It's right," I says, "I just come for the lily." And she just stared at me. "And you know what they do to people who steal?" she says. "Yes," I says, and they were the days when you could be hung for looking at a sheep almost. "But picking flowers ain't stealing," I says. "Ssshhh!" she says again. "What d'ye think I'm going to say if they find me here? Don't

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talk so loud. Come here behind these trees and keep quiet." And we went and sat down behind some old box-trees and she kept whispering about the lily and telling me to whisper for fear anyone should come. "I'll get you the lily all right," she says, "If you keep quiet. I'll dig it up".'

He ceased talking, and after the sound of his harsh, uncouth racy voice the summer afternoon seemed quieter than ever, the drowsy, stumbling boom of the bees in the July flowers only deepening the hot drowsy silence. I took a drink of the strong cool flower-odoured wine and waited for my uncle Silas to go on with the story, but nothing happened, and finally I looked up at him.

'Well?' I said.

For a moment or two he did not speak. But finally he turned and looked at me with a half-solemn, half-vivacious expression, one eye half-closed, and told me in a voice at once dreamy, devilish, innocent, mysterious and triumphant, all and more than I had asked to know.

'She gave me the lily,' he said.

THE STORY WITHOUT AN END

I

THE Restaurant Rosset, which had once been painted a prosperous white, was now dingy and cheap; so thickly freckled were its windows with the black dust of London that from the outside nothing within was visible except the ghostly white circles that were the tables and the even more ghostly white blobs which were the shirt-fronts of the waiters. It looked like the kind of place into which unhappy lovers would go to talk over some misfortune and come to a decision about their lives. On the second floor were rooms which other lovers, having a different purpose, might have used also. Pierre Moreau had been learning to be a waiter there all winter.

He was fifteen: a thin, gawky boy with long black hair, heavy southern lips that he hardly ever opened and dark mute eyes that stood out with sombre dreaminess from his sallow face. He had been growing paler and thinner throughout the winter and he now looked like a plant that had been tied up in darkness and blanched. When there was nothing to do in the restaurant, when no one wanted wine or coffee, which it was his duty to pour out, he stood with his back to the wall and stared

at the opposite wall as though he were staring at something beyond it — and beyond it hopelessly.

It was April, and spring was late. He had come over from France the previous November, alone, with his belongings in a black glacé bag and enough money to bring him to London; he knew no English: but he would learn it from Rosset and his wife, who were distant relations, and from the other waiters; it was part of the bargain his mother had made with Rosset.

From the first he had been wretched. At the very beginning he had also been frightened. He had arrived on a Sunday and he had been troubled by the bleakness of London, his loneliness, the sensation of being in a strange country, the walk with Madame Rosset through the rainy darkness to the restaurant, and then by Rosset himself.

His first sight of Rosset sent him sick; the hard lump of fear in his chest was shaken suddenly by an acute convulsion, a spasm that seemed to turn it to water, filling him with a cold nausea. Rosset was a gross figure, a man of appalling physique. Like some old boxer, he had degenerated to fat without losing his air of brutality; his greasy face, a strange yellowish-grey colour, had a loose red slit of a mouth and little black eyes that quivered under depraved loose lids that would close slowly and open again with incredible quickness, leeringly suspicious; his whole body was like that of some ponderous ape, latent with brutality and anger waiting beneath the skin to be stung into

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life. Continually he worked his brows up and down, as though itching to fly into a rage at something. When he smiled there was something loosely and suavely cynical about it; it was a potential leer. He moved about heavily, rolling from side to side, his hands clasped behind him with a kind of meditative cunning. He spoke with guttural rapidity, with a mean, sneering, brutish, domineering voice, uttering also queer noises of disgust or satisfaction.

But it was not only this. He took an instant dislike to the boy. 'Pierre, eh? Ha! Pierre?' he muttered. 'Pierre, eh?'

A spasmodic terror shot through the boy at the sound of the voice, speaking with a dark sneer of significance, as though Rosset had been waiting all his life for that moment. Rosset leered, looked him up and down. They were in the restaurant, in the long alley between the empty white tables. It was five o'clock and since it was Sunday the place was not yet open. Madame Rosset had vanished to take off her wet coat, so that Rosset and the boy were alone.

'Sit down!' roared Rosset suddenly.

And the boy, before he had realized it, sat down. It was a miracle wrought by fear. Rosset smiled with wet loose lips and grunted. The boy sat sick and white; he could feel his strength oozing from his finger-tips.

'Stand up!' roared Rosset.

And the boy, again by that miracle wrought through

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fear, stood up, sick and weak. He could not look at Rosset and in desperation he stared at the opposite wall.

‘Look at me!’ ordered Rosset.

Pierre’s eyes fixed themselves on Rosset’s face at once. There had not yet been a word of French from Rosset, yet the boy had obeyed. Rosset was leeringly triumphant. The boy stood staring, mute, mystified, at a loss to understand.

‘You see!’ said Rosset suddenly. ‘That zow you learn English — that zow. You see!’

Then, as though remembering that the boy could not understand a word, he began speaking for the first time in French. His thick glistening lips moved with repulsive rapidity; he seemed to suck and taste the words of his own language greedily, his lips protruding and sucking back again like those of a man gorging on a ripe fruit, and his voice took on a thick lusciousness of tone, almost sensual. His features were amazingly flexible and in a way that bewildered the boy he worked his lips and cheeks and brows incessantly, every movement exaggerating the grossness of his face, its lines of cruelty, its perpetual sneer of insidious suspicion.

He spoke for ten minutes, rapidly, yet coldly, with that sensual ripeness of tone, yet with intense calculation. ‘So he had come to be a waiter, eh? To learn to be a waiter? Did he know how long it took to learn that? How long did he think? How long?’ The boy listened mechanically, his sense numbed by Rosset’s

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voice, as Rosset told him his duties, how he must take the orders for wine and coffee, pour the wine and coffee, lay the knives and forks, clean the knives and forks, how he would be subordinate to everyone, Rosset, Madame Rosset, the waiters, the chef, even to the girl at the counter, how he must wash up the dishes in the afternoon and again in the morning. By a curious cynically playful tone of voice, Rosset implied that there was little to do. Only to pour the wine and the coffee, only to wash up, that was all: only a little — a little, but so important.

Rosset talked on without ever pausing for answer. All the time the boy stood stiff, half-stupid, his big mute eyes bulging. At the end of it all he understood only two things: that it took a life-time to learn to be a waiter and that the only way to learn English was Rosset's way, to speak nothing but English, to be addressed in nothing but English. He was wondering how, since he knew not a single word of English, he was to do this when Rosset suddenly shouted again:

'Sit down!'

He sat down, as before through fear, and again Rosset leered in triumph. A moment later he sucked in his thick lips and became almost menacingly serious. That was the way! Did he understand that? He was to speak French to no one but Rosset; to the rest, the diners, the waiters, the girl at the counter, he was to speak English. And so he would learn.

He gave the boy one single look, a queer look of

insinuation, his dribbling lips curled and one eyelid sagging, and then was finished.

'Madame!' he called. 'Madame!' Without waiting he rolled off, grunting, between the rows of tables and vanished as Madame Rosset appeared in the restaurant to take the boy to his room.

Pierre followed Madame upstairs, to a little room under the roof, four stories up. Madame was fat and glum but there was no strength in her bulk and nothing to fear in her silence: she had weak grey eyes that blinked continually as though at a strong light and a little red cupid mouth whose colourlessness she painted over with some dark red colour, like that of cheap red wine; her hair was black and frizzy, half hiding her little tumbling black ear-rings. She was like some round, naive, mindless doll. Perhaps Rosset had forbidden her to talk, for when she spoke she kept glancing back, with little apprehensive uneasy smiles, towards the stairs. She seemed glad when she had told the boy to change into the waiter's suit that lay on the little iron bed and be down in the restaurant by six. She left him a candle, flickering on the wooden wash-stand under the roof-window. He would rather have been in darkness. He changed his suit; the trousers struck damp against his legs, his hands were cold and he could not manipulate the shirt studs. Only these things kept him from blowing out the candle, from plunging himself into a darkness in which he could feel safe from Rosset, in which he could even hide from

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Rosset if necessary. He did not realize until he began to go downstairs the full depth of his weakness and terror; his legs would scarcely support his body, weighed down by its flood of sickness and dread, a sickness which he felt might at any moment make him swoon and a dread which was already half-turned to terror. He groped his way heavily and slowly, as though ill, downstairs. At moments only his body seemed to be in existence; the rest of him became annihilated, dead even to terror. At last the smell of cooking reached him, awoke the deadness in him and gave him a little comfort. He went into the restaurant with a queer, forced, half-paralysed step.

To his relief Rosset was not back. A waiter was just drawing back the bolts of the street-door to open the place for the evening. Pierre stood still, watching. The waiter switched on the lights, fingered the dark leaves of the aspidistra in the window, peered into the dark street. The lights of other restaurants shone out across the street. The waiter stood still, his napkin on his arm, his thin sallow face negative, blank, thoughtless, his weak round-shouldered body broken and servile.

Turning, he saw the boy. He came from the window, hobbling badly. 'Bon soir, Pierre'. His voice was hollow, and spiritless. The boy nodded, formed some words on his lips, heard them in his mind and felt that they had been spoken. In reality he knew he was afraid to speak. He expected Rosset at any

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moment: the waiter also had fear in his eyes, an unconscious fear, an emotion bred of years of just such waiting.

But Rosset did not arrive; and they held a brief whispered conversation, the man giving the boy hoarse scraps of advice, little tips to remember. He was not to be afraid, he was not to be afraid, he kept whispering. It was all right.

The only other waiter appeared and stared also with that fixed blankness into the dark street. How long had they been there, these waiters? The boy kept wondering. Had they also come, as boys, to learn? Would he too go on serving for years and years and become like them? Would he also, in time, stare out into the dark street with that fixed emptiness of expression, his body crushed and servile, waiting for something? Was that what Rosset meant when he said that it took years to become a waiter? He caught himself staring, too, with a curious static gaze, as he wondered.

A moment later he was standing alone; the waiter beside him was hurriedly flicking at the tables with his napkin, the waiter at the window was nervously busy over a cruet. He turned in sudden alarm at their sudden fearful activity. Rosset had entered.

He had come in silently, and in the same silent way he moved to the window. He did not look at the boy, who stood stiff and contracted with fear. After a moment, rubbing his hands together, he turned from

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the window and came back. Fear seized the boy like a paralysis; he held himself rigid as though against a blow, contracted, sick. And again Rosset did nothing, neither looked nor spoke.

Diners began to drift in by twos and threes, Rosset greeting them with obese affability, rubbing his hands or hiding them behind his back. The place became animated: there was a clatter of conversation and crockery together, the shouting of waiters and the answering echo from the kitchen below. Rosset walked up and down. And the boy, all the time, might not have existed.

From taking the wine-list to each table the boy returned always to the same place: an opening between two empty tables, at the edge of the gangway. There he stood, his fingers gripping the wine-list, enduring over and over again the same piercing fear of Rosset each time he passed him. He felt always weak, cold, dazed; he hardly saw anything except Rosset. It would have been a relief to do something, to pour out some wine: but no one had yet asked for wine. He was to discover later that it was an event when anyone did.

Finally he almost conquered his fear of Rosset. He could do it by staring at the opposite wall, by staring so intensely as to see beyond it and there lose himself. He would stare in this desperate way for minutes on end, while Rosset passed and repassed, saying and doing nothing to him.

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He was aroused from one of these stares by a sudden blow on his chest, a blow which made him stagger back against the wall, and by Rosset's voice in a fierce whisper:

'Always against the wall — always against the wall.' The words came first in English and then in French. 'Always against the wall. You see? Always against the wall.'

The boy pressed himself back against the wall. His head, cracked against the wall, ached and throbbed. He shut his eyes, groped in a cold swooning darkness and came to life again. Rosset had gone.

He stared at the opposite wall. A long time seemed to pass. Finding that someone wished for coffee he roused himself, took it, poured it into the cups, came back to the wall again. 'Always against the wall,' he kept thinking. A little later, realizing that someone was staring at him in return, he let his eyes flicker back to a conscious gaze. This brought back a consciousness of mind also. He looked down the restaurant towards the door.

There, on a table, stood the cash-desk, at which Madame Rosset had sat all evening. Now Madame Rosset had gone and her place had been taken by a girl of perhaps twenty-eight or nine, a dark, sallow-skinned girl with a mass of luxuriant black hair, and warm liquid eyes. He did not understand her sudden presence. Perhaps the Rossets had gone for their evening meal. His mind seemed stupid, drugged.

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He tried to force into his eyes some expression of understanding, of response. It was futile. Something in him had been crushed, annihilated, by that blow of Rosset's sending him back against the wall.

Nevertheless the girl continued to look at him. With her big, fluid dark eyes she coaxed him back gradually to a belief in his own existence. He felt inexpressibly soothed. Finally she shrugged her shoulders, smiled and made a droll face in the direction where Rosset must have gone. In spite of himself he smiled. She repeated it all, with a momentary flash of mimicry, mocking Rosset's twitching brows, his fierce eyes and loose drooping lips. As, in spite of himself, he smiled again, she looked round, saw an imaginary Rosset approaching, bent her head hastily over the accounts and then looked up again, grinning with eyes that were bright and mischievous.

As the evening went on she would repeat all this. It saved him from complete despair, took him away from himself. Her dumb-show was delicious. Normally he would have abandoned himself to absurd laughter. But he still felt sick; he was still apprehensive about Rosset's sudden return; and he gave her back quick little smiles which simply flickered across his face and fled.

The clatter of the restaurant died down. On Sundays it shut down at eleven, and long before then he was utterly weary by that prolonged standing against the wall. His head ached, the sickness in his heart

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persisted, and only the smiling mimicry of the girl saved him, again and again, from desolation.

Once, just before eleven, Rosset returned, on drunken legs, took a lugubrious look round the empty restaurant and then disappeared.

Soon afterwards a waiter bolted the door. The girl came from behind the cash-desk, straight to the boy. She spoke to him quickly in the flexible, sweet tones of his own language.

'Go up to bed, quickly,' she told him. 'Quickly. We'll clear up. Go along and sleep. We'll talk to-morrow.'

She put her arm softly about his shoulders, gave him a brief squeeze, and took him to the door. 'There you go — sleep well.' He caught the comfortable odour of her dress and the thick warm fragrance of her body.

As he dragged himself upstairs he burst into tears, silently, and he lay on his bed choking with deep sobs of agony, holding his hands desperately to his mouth, afraid that Rosset would hear and come up and knock the life out of him.

I I

It was Sunday again, Easter Sunday. He stood there, against the wall, pressed back, as he had done every day of the winter. It was midday: in April the sun, at noon, could just clear the high roof of the buildings

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opposite Rosset's; it was fitful windy April weather, with stumbling white clouds which hid the sun, and snow-cold air. There was no sign of spring: not even a daffodil on the tables of the empty restaurant. The two waiters stood at the window, gazing into the street, waiting for something to turn up, and the girl, Yvette, sat at the cash-desk, scratching her head with a pencil, licking her lips, and exchanging occasional glances with the boy, her eyes sparkling and mischievous. Sometimes she hugged herself against the cold and at last she got up and walked about the restaurant, stamping her feet. She walked to the far end of the empty room and turned, and it occurred to her then to retrace her steps like Rosset and she came back with his heavy rolling gait, twitching her brows up and down, her hands clasped behind her back, her full red lips loosely drooping. 'Ah! bon jour, m'sieu', bon jour! You like to sit 'ere? No? Over there? Nize table, ver' nize. The Preence of Wales sit sometimes there — sometimes. Oh yes. Sometimes. You sit 'ere? As you wish, m'sieu.'

She had come down to the door and was bowing and rubbing her hands to that imaginary customer, while the waiters rolled against themselves and laughed and the boy smiled with delight by the wall, and now suddenly she flung up her hands and turned back by a series of quick rhythmical turns up the room, like a dancer, her black skirts flowing out wider and wider like an opening sunshade, showing her plump legs and

the mauve garters on her black stockings just above her knees. Laughing with delight, she kept snapping her fingers, and performing little seductive wriggles of her body for sheer joy.

‘Ach! Rosset! Who cares anything about Rosset now? Who cares anything? Pouf!’

It was a great day, for Rosset and his wife had gone away for Easter Sunday, on a visit to some relations, so that Pierre, the girl and the waiters would be free after three o’clock until the place opened again at six in the evening.

Almost intoxicated by the mere thought of freedom, the girl bantered with the waiters, satirically. Where were they going for their long holiday? Ah! but she knew. They didn’t need to tell her. She knew! She walked up and down the restaurant, hobbling a little, talking to the imaginary image of a girl on her arm, smiling. ‘Where do I work? Tut, tut! Don’t you know, I’m the *maître d’hôtel* at the Restaurant Rosset? Fifty waiters! You didn’t know it? Ah, ah! Let us sit down, shall we? My feet ache.’

Without Rosset the place was transformed; and since no one had yet come in to eat it was strangely quiet in the intervals of the girl’s foolery. Yet the boy, by the wall, was weary, almost afraid. Without consciously knowing it, he kept looking at the door, expecting to see at any moment the fat shadow of Rosset on the white curtain. It was something which no mere gaiety could dispel, this fear of Rosset. It was

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something cancerous, unseen but deep, gnawing at the tissues of mind, never letting him rest, blackening his brain. His heart still bounded to his throat, flooding him with its sickening nausea, at the mere approach of Rosset, and alone again, even though Rosset had said nothing to him, he would feel weak and swooning, drained white by his own fear. It might have been different, he sometimes reasoned, if Rosset's own antagonism had lessened; but that too increased. He seemed to hate the faintest sight of the boy's mute face, with its dark bulging eyes, and its shrinking mouth. It was a hatred that had no limits; it rose from the mere cold despising sneer when the boy dropped a spoon to the fanatical heat of fury that poured out savagely as when he spilled the wine, as he had once done, at the table of a party of suburban fools, half-drunk, who had come in late one night to play a kind of Bohemian pantomime which they found amusing. But it could go beyond this, to be more petty or more diabolical, so that the boy feared not only its outward manifestations, but its inward strength, its terrible potentiality. One day Rosset would kill him; not by a blow or by deliberation, but by the mere persistency of his hatred, of a long cruel sucking at his life. When there was no more pleasure in cruelty he would throw the boy out perhaps, but as long as there was a response from him, that sudden awful light of fear in his eyes, he would torture him, like an animal, for the mere pleasure of seeing him suffer. The boy hoped for

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dismissal, praying to be sent back: but there was no hope of it. He was as necessary to Rosset's life, though he did not know it, as Rosset was to his.

He could speak a little English now, but his words were mere repetitions of words, made into quaint phrases, that he had picked up surreptitiously from the girl and the waiters. Except that he was whiter, more strained, it was the only outward sign of change in him. Underneath he had the big yellow-black bruises where Rosset had kicked him, on the legs and thighs, but he said nothing of them. He limped sometimes, but to questions he said that he had slipped on the brass-shod stairs. But the girl knew, and from the look of strained pity in her eyes he was made aware of it.

They had become intimate. With her gaiety she made friends easily: her moods were elastic and the current of her joy would sometimes transmit itself to him. There were things that they must do together, the washing-up, the cleaning of the silver, down in the basement. They sat at the table or stood over the sink for hours together, the girl keeping up her tireless pantomime, mocking Rosset, Madame Rosset, the two waiters, the regular diners. They talked in whispers, learned the art of laughing silently, and could read each other's eyes.

She was twenty-nine, a Breton, one of a big family; there were always letters for her, from sisters and brothers and her mother, long letters which she read to the boy, mimicking the writer, as they cleaned the

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cutlery together. He was from the South, the Mediterranean; he had wanted to go to sea, but his mother, blindly worshipping, had only one dream for him. She saw him as a kind of heavenly *maître d'hôtel*, the archangel of all waiters, and with joy and pride she had made this bargain with her cousin Rosset. She kept a little wine-shop overlooking the sea, and sailors came in to bring her fish in exchange for a bit of bread and some wine. There was a fisherman named Anton, a very old man with a little red woollen tasselled cap, who had taken him fishing in the bay in summer afternoons. His heart began to ache whenever he thought of it. Quick to catch at his moods, the girl would see this and make him tell what troubled him and when he told her she would laugh it off, with gentle carelessness.

'Fishing? For what? Shrimps? What else could you and an old man hope to catch, eh?'

'We'd row out, a long way out.'

'Who? — who rowed? Not that old man! No? Then you?—ach! with arms like that—with those drumsticks?'

'I used to be fatter.'

'I wish I could say that!'

She would shrug her shoulders, spread out her hands in a ballooning curve. 'Soon I shall be like that.' And sometimes she would seize his head impulsively and draw it down and rest it on her plump shoulder, tangling his hair, patting his cheeks, kissing him, all to comfort him, to make him forget himself and Rosset.

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To-day, Easter Sunday, they were going out together, alone, for a joy ride, and since they could not hope for more than two free hours they had decided to ride on a bus to Hyde Park. It was Yvette's idea: simply to walk on the grass, to see the daffodils swaying and fluttering in the cold April wind, like fluffy yellow birds, to have tea somewhere, to know the joy of being waited upon for once in their lives, to come back. The boy had no money and knew nothing of London. It was to be a treat for him, said the girl, at her expense. But within himself it had already become something more; he felt his heart pulling against his body, wild at this chance of escape.

He was afraid almost to think it: but he might even not come back to Rosset's.

It was nearly two o'clock. A thin young man, a regular customer, had been in, eaten his *hors d'œuvres* and cutlet, shaken his head at coffee and had gone. There remained only a middle-aged man, alone in one corner, masticating a steak and fried potatoes. When he had gone the waiters would shut the place, and Pierre and the girl would go too.

At last they were in the basement, washing up, bantering, almost free. Yvette washed the dishes and the boy dried them. The cook had already departed and soon the waiters came down, overcoats on, to say good-bye.

'I do so hope you have a nice holiday,' said the girl. 'You will write, won't you? You will be away so long!'

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The waiters hobbled off, there was a sound of the restaurant door shutting, and they were alone.

'Now you go,' she said, 'and change your clothes and make yourself look pretty. Quick! Be ready in ten minutes.'

And as he bounded upstairs, almost frightened by the thought of even temporary freedom, she called after him:

'Pierre, Pierre!' and when he halted, wondering sickly: 'Don't forget to wash your ears! Ach!'

He was ready quickly and stood at the window as he put on his collar, looking at the low clouds which had begun to gather sombrely, an ugly goose-grey, over the roofs of the city. Suddenly he saw the sky and the roofs pencilled with rain and heard the quick April clatter of it on the slates above his head. As it came faster and persisted, darkening the roofs with its flood, he felt depressed to wretchedness.

He ran down a flight of stairs to the next landing and tapped at the girl's door.

'It's raining,' he said. 'It's raining.'

'You know what they say in our part?' she called from the bedroom. 'Let it!'

'Shall we go?'

'We'll swim.'

He stood still outside the door, listening to the rain beating heavily on a skylight above, the sound depressing him again.

'Are you still there?' she called.

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‘Yes.’

‘You can come in.’

He opened the door slowly and went in. She was sitting half-dressed before a mirror by the window, combing her hair. ‘It will soon leave off,’ she said. She spoke to his reflection in the glass and watched him standing awkwardly by the door, his dark eyes seeking her and her image in the mirror diffidently, and as though she knew what his feelings must be she tilted the mirror so that he could see only a black half-moon of her hair in the glass and she saw a quick start of light in his eyes as she did so. Her hair was long, so that it took a long time to comb it straight, brush it and coil it back into the intricate knot which must rest low on her neck. Newly brushed, the hair was fine and sleek as satin. Outside the rain smashed in the window. ‘Well, if it must rain,’ she said, ‘you must row me there in a boat. I will be that old man, that Anton you talk about, and we will catch fish in the Serpentine. I see you rowing — you, with those drumsticks!’ Laughing, she bent her arms and began to row an imaginary boat, pulling strongly, so that her bare shoulders rippled and her breasts swelled richly upward.

As he watched the rich movement of her body he felt a sudden hot spasm in his blood, an electric start of surprised delight. In the mirror she saw his face, and half-wishing she had not asked him to come in, she rose and began to search about for her dress and stockings, the old dark mischievous look no longer in

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her eyes, which she kept averted, hardly daring to meet the passionate watchfulness in his own.

Finding her stockings she sat on the side of the bed farthest from him and rippled them quickly on, looking at the rain lashing at the windows, carelessly, white and hard as a storm of hail. Once she shrugged her shoulders, fatalistically, as if to say 'If it rains, it rains,' and the ripple of her bare shoulders, though she did not know it, made him start excitedly again. Yet he stood near the door every moment, with the curious half-eager look of youthful passion in his eyes, and something keeping him back from her.

At last there came a moment when they must decide whether to wait or go. The rain was lashing down in a flood; the light of the afternoon had been washed out.

'Well?' she shrugged her shoulders.

He made no answer. Downstairs a clock chimed and struck three. It was a heavy black marble clock which stood in a private room, one of those rooms which Rosset kept for the convenience of special customers, on the floor below. Rosset wound it up himself every Sunday at three, timing it carefully, and was insistent about it, though the room was hardly ever used.

Suddenly the girl sprang into activity. 'Ach! What of a little shower? Let's go now quickly. We must wind the clock as we go downstairs.'

She slipped into her dress. 'Pierre, come and button me!' she cried, and then:

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'Ah! no, I'll manage. Go down and wind the clock. I'll come down in a moment.'

He went down reluctantly, his heart beating with excitement, his limbs curiously heavy. In the little private-room he found that his hand trembled as he searched behind the clock for the key. He was opening the round glass face of the clock when the girl came down.

'Wind the clock with one hand,' she cried out to him, 'and do up these buttons with the other. Only two — at the top. I've done the rest.'

She was laughing and the dark mischievous flash was back in her eyes.

As he tried to obey her, fiddling with the clock-key with one hand and the clasp of her black dress with the other, something came over him, a flush of passionate longing to touch her, and he suddenly forgot the clock and unfastened her dress instead of fastening it and ran his hands falteringly over her breasts, touching them at first very shyly, through the fine stuff of her dress, and then, because she offered no word or sign of resistance, in their warm fragrant nakedness. She could feel the shy trembling of his hands, almost in agony, as they brushed her, and later in the afternoon the gasp of ecstatic pain from him as she loved him. And knowing only too well the pain of that first love to him she put her mouth hard against his head and ran it backwards and forwards, with little caressing murmurs, to comfort him. At times he looked at her almost in fear, but with a fear which she had never seen

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on his face before, the fear not of Rosset but of the strength of his own emotions.

The rain kept on all afternoon and they gave up the thought of going out unconsciously, but they remembered that they had intended to eat and they went downstairs at last and made themselves coffee in the kitchen and ate fresh bread with it. All the time she saw in his face the flash of new emotions; and there was a fresh bright strength about him, almost swaggering, which banished the old mute fear. Her love had emancipated him, renewed him. There was a tumultuous joy in her own breast, a joy both at the giving of her love and the vanquishing of his fear.

The rain went steadily on, but they were hardly conscious of it. In the little private room Rosset's clock stood open and still unwound and they made it an excuse to go up again. While they remained there she could feel him all the time rising above his old dumbness and fear and she felt blissfully happy.

Suddenly she sprang up, hearing something down below, the noise of a door being opened, and then both she and the boy leapt to their feet at the sound of Rosset's voice.

'Who is 'ere? Where are you? Who is it who 'as made coffee? Where are you? Where are you?'

The voice, at first subdued, rose to a yell as Rosset came to the stairs. They heard him begin to come up, shouting:

'Who is it? Where are you? Where are you? Come out!'

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Like a blundering animal, he came bellowing upstairs, throwing open doors, shouting more loudly than ever into the silence of the top story. Pierre and the girl stood absolutely still, staring and listening.

'Who is it? Where are you?' he kept shouting, more and more angry as the silence of the house met him.

Stamping and cursing he passed the door of the little room and was hastening downstairs when the marble clock struck a quarter. He turned back at once like a furious beast and burst into the room. Pierre and the girl stood there transfixed, never having moved since his first shout, and he came upon them with an exclamation of guttural joyous anger. The girl had not even buttoned her dress.

He stood for one moment glaring at them, his brows working up and down in anger, his body grunting for breath. His lips trembled violently and his little eyes fixed themselves with fury on the girl's unbuttoned frock.

'Get out of this room!' he roared at last. 'Get out!'

The boy, so used to obeying that voice even when he did not understand its language, came forward involuntarily. With a grunt of fury Rosset knocked him aside, pointing to the girl instead.

'You!' he shouted. 'You I mean. Get out of this room — this house. And don' come back — don' come back.'

As she moved forward and past him and out of the room and went upstairs he hurled after her a spout of abusive fury until he was exhausted and had no strength

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even to look at the boy, standing in readiness to be abused and he hoped also, like the girl, dismissed.

Half-way downstairs Rosset remembered and there came a shout:

‘And you — down in the restaurant. I will see you.’

At the words the old sickening terror ran through the boy, sapping away completely the strength and joy the girl had given him. He stumbled downstairs, conscious only in a dazed way of what was happening.

In the evening he stood in the restaurant by the table, mutely waiting and watching the waiters peer into the dark street and Rosset marching up and down in agitation. As Rosset passed him he shrank into himself, half-swooning with fear, always expecting a torrent of abuse such as that he had flung at the girl. It did not come but, knowing it would come, in time, he fell into the old trick of staring at the opposite wall and losing himself beyond it.

Suddenly he felt again that blow at his chest, flinging him backwards.

‘Always against the wall!’ Rosset’s voice whispered fiercely with anger. ‘Always against the wall!’

The boy pressed himself back to the wall, so hard that there was a pain where his head touched it.

In his eyes lay an expression not only of fear and sickness. They had a queer furtive, sideways look, that half-desperate, half-hopeless look, almost criminal, that dwells in the eyes of the oppressed and persecuted, of those who cannot escape.

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SHE is very old, a little sprig of a woman, spare and twisted. The sun is hardly past its noon. She has climbed uphill out of the town, up the hot, white road, with curious fretting footsteps, half-running, half-walking, as though afraid that some other gleaner will have come up before her. But as far as she can see, into a distance of mellow light under a sky as mild and wonderfully blue as the stray chicory-stars still blooming among the stiff yellow grasses by the roadside, the world is empty. She is alone, high up, insignificantly solitary in a world of pure untrembling light that pours straight down, washing away the summer-green gloom from the tops of the still trees. There is not even the stirring of a sheep over the land or the flickering of a bird in the sky; nothing to alarm or rival or distract her. Yet she goes on always with that fretting eagerness, as though afraid, not resting or satisfied until she sees the wheatfield before her, empty like the rest of the earth except for that downpour and flood of golden light upon its stubbled slope.

She pushes open the gate, clicks it shut behind her, flaps open her sack, takes one swift and comprehensive glance at the field, and bends her back. Her fingers are rustling like quick mice over the stubble, and the red wheat ears are rustling together in her hands before she

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has taken another step forward. There is no time for looking or listening or resting. To glean, to fill her sack, to travel over that field before the light is lost; she has no other purpose than that and could understand none.

Long ago, in another century, she also came up to this same field, on just such still, light-flooded afternoons, for this same eternal and unchanging purpose. But not alone; they would glean then, in families, occasionally in villages, with handcarts and barrows, from early morning until evening, from one gleaning-bell to another. Since it meant so much, since corn was life — that law was as old as time itself — they gleaned incessantly, desperately. Every ear on the face of every field had to be gathered up, and she can remember her mother's fist in her back harrying her to glean faster, and how, in turn, she also urged her children to go on and on, never to rest until the field was clear and the light had died.

She is already away from the gate, moving quickly out into the field away from the ruts that the wagons have cut and the ears they have smashed into the sun-baked soil. She moves with incredible quickness, fretfully, almost as fearfully as she came up the hill. In her black skirt and blouse, and with her sharp white head for ever near the earth, she looks like a hungry bird, always pecking and nipping at something, never resting, never satisfied.

Her sleeves are rolled up, showing her thin, corn-

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coloured arms, with the veins knotty and stiff about her bony wrists. Her hands seem to be still young in their quickness and vitality, like the young tips of an old tree, and the intent yet tranquil look on her face is eternal. It is a little, sharp, fleshless, million-wrinkled face; it is like a piece of wood, worn down by time, carved down pitilessly and relentlessly, the softness of the cheeks and mouth and eyes scooped out to make deep hollows, the bone of the cheeks and chin and forehead left high and sharp as knots in the wood. As though years of sun-flooded days in gleaning fields had stained it, the flesh is a soft, shining corn colour. Even the blue dimness of her eyes has become touched by the faintest drop of this corn-coloured radiance — the colour of age, of autumn, of dying, almost of death itself.

In the open field the sun is very hot. Beating down from an autumn angle the force of its light and heat falls full on her back or into her eyes as she zigzags up and down or across the stubble-rows. She appears to move carelessly, without method, gleaning chance ears as she sees them; she moves, in reality, by instinct, to some ancient and inborn system, unconsciously, but surely as a bird. Miraculously she misses scarcely an ear. She moves incessantly, she looks tireless. Sometimes she glances quickly over her shoulder, across the field, into the sky, with brief unconscious anxiety about something, but the world is empty.

It is as though there is no one in the world except

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herself who gleanes any longer. She is not merely alone: she is the last of the gleaners, the last survivor of an ancient race. Nevertheless, moving across the field under the mellow sun, nipping up the ears in her quick hands, shaking her sack, dragging it over the stubble, she looks eternal. She is doing something that has been done since the beginning of time and is not conscious of it; she is concerned only with the ears, the straws, the length of the stubble, the way she must go. She scarcely notices even the flowers, ground blooming and creeping flowers that the binder cannot touch, little mouse-carpets of periwinkle and speedwell, purple coronets of knapweed, trumpets of milk-coloured and pink convolvulus, a scabious bursting a mauve bud, bits of starry camomile. Occasionally she is impatient at something — at the straggling length of the stubble, the riot of thistle and coltsfoot that chokes the rows. Nowadays the binder leaves the straw so long and shaggy. Nobody hoes any longer, nobody gleanes, nobody troubles. The crop is poor and uneven, and she comes across wastes of thin straw and much green rank twitch where the earth is barren of corn and she scarcely picks an ear, though she never straightens her back and never ceases that mouse-quick searching with her brown hands.

But later, in the heat of the afternoon, with her sack filling up and the sun-heat and bright light playing unbrokenly upon her, she begins unconsciously to move more slowly, a little tired, like a child that has played

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too long. She will not cover the field, and as she moves there, always solitary, up and down the stubble, empty except for herself and a rook or two, she begins to look smaller and the field larger and larger about her.

At last she straightens her back. It is her first conscious sign of weariness. She justifies it by looking into the sky and over the autumn-coloured land sloping away to the town; briefly she takes in the whole soft-lighted world, the effulgence of wine-yellow light on the trees and the dove-coloured roofs below and a straggling of rooks lifting heavily off the stubble and settling farther on again.

She stoops and goes on once more; and then soon, another rest, another glance into the sky, and then another beginning. Very soon there is a thistle pricking her hand, and she is glad to stop and pull it out and suck the place with her thin lips.

Ahead of her there is a hedge of hawthorn and blackberry, with great oaks that throw balloons of shadow across the field. She moves into the oak shade with relief; it is cool, like a drink of water, like a clean white sheet; and the coolness fills her with a new vitality, so that she goes on gleaning for a long time without needing to rest.

By and by she is working along the hedge. Straws have been plaited and twisted by wind among the hawthorn and blackberry and wild clematis and sloe, and she goes along picking them off, twisting them together and dropping them into her sack, her body upright.

It is easier. She can smell the darkening blackberries, the first dying odour of leaves. She stops to gather and eat a dewberry, squeezing it against her palate like a dark grape; to rub the misty purple-green bloom off a sloe with her fingers.

There are many straws on the hedge. The sack is heavy. She walks very slowly, dragging it, wondering all the time why she does not lift it to her shoulder and start for home, but something stronger than herself keeps her picking and gleaning, missing nothing.

It is not until the light begins to fail that she thinks of departing. She has begun to carry the sack in her arms, hugging it to her chest, setting it down at intervals and gleaning the stubble about it. There is no need to go on, but some inherent, unconscious, eternal impulse keeps her moving perpetually. But still she glances up sometimes with the old fear, wondering if some other gleaner will come.

She has worked towards the gate and there she sets down the sack and rests a moment. It is late afternoon; dark crowds of starlings are flying over and gathering in invisible trees, making a great murmur in the late quietness. Before she can depart she must lift the sack to her back or lift it to the gate and bend her back beneath it. She is very tired. She might leave the sack under the hedge; she might come again to-morrow; but she suddenly catches the sack in her arms, hoists it to the gate with an immense effort as though her life depended upon it.

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Her strength is not enough. The sack, very full, half falls back upon her, but in a moment she makes a tremendous effort and, as she makes it, lifting the sack slowly upright again, she feels her eyes, for some reason, fill with the stupid tears of age and weakness.

In a moment it is all over, forgotten. She makes a great effort to lift up the sack. She succeeds. The sack falls across her back, bearing her down, and she catches at its mouth, holds it and staggers away.

Her tears have stopped and she has not thought of wiping them away, and as she staggers off down the road towards the sunset they roll down among her million wrinkles and find their way to her mouth. She goes on without resting. She looks more than ever eternal, an earth-figure, as old and ageless and primitive as the corn she carries.

As she goes on, the light dies rapidly until there is only an orange glow in the western sky like the murky light of a candle. The air is cool, still, autumnal. Her tears have dried on her cheeks, and now and then she can taste the salt of them still on her lips: the salt of her own body, the salt of the earth.

THE WOMAN WHO HAD IMAGINATION

I

THE yellow brake climbed slowly uphill out of the town, leaving behind it the last ugly red houses; the two white horses broke into an abrupt trot along the level road, the brasses tinkling softly and winking brilliantly in the noon sunshine, and all the passengers who had leaned forward up the hill to ease the strain on the horses leaned back with relief and then lurched forward again with the sudden onward jerk of the brake, the men's straw boaters knocking against the wide sunshades and the big flowered hats of the giggling women. There were many shouts of mock alarm and laughter: 'Whoops! What ho, she bumps! Whoa! mare! Want to throw us out? Whoa! Get off my lap! Stop the brake, me voice's slipped down me trousers' leg! What's the matter? Horses going to a fire or something? Oh Lord, me bandeau's slipped! Get off my lap I tell you! Whoops! Steady! How d'ye think we're going to sing after this? Stop 'em, me voice's crawling up me other leg! Oh, ain't he a case? Oh dear! Ain't he a caution? What ho! Now we're off! Oh, don't he say some bits? Now we're off! Altogether! Whoops! Dearie! Altogether!'

Gradually the parasols became still and circumspect,

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the women gave their hatpins little tidying pushes and smoothed their dresses, and the horses fell automatically into a smoother pace, the sound of running wheels and the click-clocking of hoofs becoming an unchanged and sleepy rhythm in the still midsummer air.

At the rear of the brake, wedged closely in between a hawking fishmonger who still gave off an odour of red herrings, and a balloon of a woman who was sucking rosebud cachous and wheezing for breath as though she had swallowed a button-whistle, sat a youth of twenty. At the height of the giggling and banting and shouting he sat in unsmiling silence. He looked proud and bored. The brake was filled with the Orpheus Male Voice Glee Singers and their wives and sweet-hearts. That afternoon and again in the evening they were to sing on the lawns of a big house, in competition with a score of other choirs, ten miles on in the heart of the country. Aloof and sensitive, the youth had made up his mind that he was above such things.

'Like a cachou, 'Enry?' said the stout woman.

'No thanks,' he said.

'Real rose. Make your breath smell beautiful.'

'No thanks.'

He had come on the outing against his will. And now — cachous! He looked about him with a kind of bored disgust in which there was also something unhappy. The whole brake was tittering and chattering with a gaiety that seemed to him puerile and maddening. The strong odours of violet and lavender perfumes

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and the stout woman's rose-scented cachous mingled with the hot smell of horses and sun-scorched varnish and men's cheap hair-oil. He caught now and then a breath of some dark carnation from a button-hole, but the clove-sweetness would become mixed with the odour of stale red herrings. At the front of the brake he could see his father, a little man dressed in a straw hat cocked on the back of his head and a dapper grey suit with the jacket thrown wide open in order to show off a pale yellow waistcoat with pearl buttons. Opposite his father sat his mother, plump, double-chinned, with big adoring brown eyes, dressed in a lavender-grey dress and hat to match his father's suit. Round her neck she wore a thin band of black velvet. The very latest! No other woman in the brake sported a band of black velvet. Yet he thought his mother looked hot and uncomfortable, as though the black velvet were strangling her, and his father sat as though she never existed, bobbing constantly up and down to call to someone in the rear of the brake, talking excitedly to anyone and everyone but her.

It was solely because of his father that Henry Solly had come on the outing. Solly! What a name! His father was conductor of the choir, a sort of musical Napoleon, very small and absurdly vain, who wanted to conquer the world with the sound of his own voice. Stout, excitable, electric, he was like a little Napoleonic Jack-in-the-box, with tiny cocksure blue eyes, a fair, sharp-waxed moustache, and a kind of clockwork

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chattering voice that changed as though by a miracle, when he sang, into a bass of magnificent tone, warm, rich and strong. By profession he was a draper, but the shop was gloomily unattractive and poorly patronized, so that Alfred found a good deal of time to sit in the back living-room and practice hymns and oratorio and part-songs on the American organ while Henry attended the shop. It was a boring, passionless, depressing existence. 'When you grow up, Henry,' his father had been fond of saying, 'you'll have to wait in the shop.' He often wondered and sometimes still continued to wonder what it was he must wait for? Already he had now been seven years in the shop, waiting. And he had begun to feel now that he would go on for another twenty, thirty, perhaps even fifty years, still waiting and still wondering what he was waiting for. There he would be, fifty years hence, still dusting and re-arranging the thick flannel shirts, pants, waistcoats, corduroy trousers, body-belts, patent collar fasteners, stiff cuffs and starched white dickies; still writing the little white cards to pin on the frowzy articles in the window, *Solly for Style — Solly for Smartness — Solly for Shirts — Socks — Suits — Studs and Suspenders — Solly for Everything*; still dusting and setting out the window every Monday morning, carrying in the absurd naked dummies, dressing them and pinning on them, as he did now, a card saying *The Latest for 1902*, only changing the style of the dresses and the date as he grew older. He saw himself as some

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fatuous patriarchal draper grown half-idiotic from years behind a counter, his mind starved and enfeebled by lack of the commonest pleasures of the world. And there he would be, still waiting, with the certainty of achieving nothing but death. He felt sometimes as if he could hurl a dummy through the shop window on some dead and empty Monday morning and then walk out and never come back again. Or if only one of those grey, naked ladies' dummies would come to life!

At the same smooth and now monotonous pace the brake went on into the heart of the country. All the time he sat silent and contemplative. He was fair-haired, with a pale, almost nervously sensitive face that had something attractive in its very pallor and in the intensity of the blue eyes and the small mobile mouth. His body, slight and undeveloped from years of waiting in the ill-ventilated and gloomy shop, had something restless and almost anxious about it even as he sat still and stared from the faces in the brake to the fields and woods, quivering and bright in the noon heat, that travelled smoothly past like some slowly unwound sun-golden panorama. It had about it also something stiff and unsatisfied and unhappy. His straw hat was fastened with a black silk guard to the lapel of his coat; it was his mother's idea: as though on that windless, burning day his straw hat would blow off! And just as his straw hat was tied to him he felt tied to the brake, the absurd giggling passengers and the monotony of his own thoughts. As he sat there, unhappily wishing

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he had never come, he thought dismally of the afternoon ahead — singing, tea in a noisy marquee, more singing on the lawns in the summer twilight, refreshments, more singing, the ride home, and more singing again. Singing! It would have been different if the word had meant anything to him. But he couldn't sing a single note correctly or in tune. How often had his father offered him half a crown if he could sing, without going sharp or flat, one verse of 'The Day Thou Gavest, Lord, is Ended.' He had never succeeded.

'Can you 'itch up a bit?' said the fishmonger suddenly.

Henry moved along the plush seat a fraction, but without speaking.

'That's better. Ain't it hot? If this weather holds I'm a dunner. Fish won't keep, y'know. I had a case o' fresh whiting in yesterday and the missus fainted. Went clean off. That's the fish-trade. See y'money go bad under your eyes.'

The fishmonger's coarse red skin oozed little yellow streams of sweat, which he kept wiping off with his handkerchief, puffing heavily as he took off his bowler hat and mopped his red bald head. He was renowned for his voice, a light sweet tenor, and for his moving and passionate interpretation of 'Come into the Garden, Maud'.

'Blimey,' he kept saying. 'I'm done like a dinner.'

The road, after climbing up a little, had begun to

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drop down again towards a wooded valley. The country stretched out infinitely green and yellow under the pure intensity of noon light. In the near distance the road shimmered under the heat like quivering water. Cattle had gathered under the shade of trees, unmoving except for the clockwork flicking of their tails as they stared at the passing brake with its crowd of laughing passengers. By a woodside there was a murmur of doves invisible in the thick-leaved trees, warm, liquid, sleepy, and no other bird-sound except the occasional cry of a jay disturbed by the noise of wheels and voices. The brief cool wood-shade was like a draught of water; the shrill voices and clocking hoofs made cool empty echoes in the deep sun-flickered shadowy silence. Someone in the brake reached up and shook a low-hanging bough that in swishing back again seemed to set all the leaves in the wood rustling with a soft, dry, endless whispering. The scent of honeysuckle was suddenly very strong and exquisite, pouring out from the wood in a sweet invisible mist that seemed to disperse as soon as the brake was out in the sunshine again. After the dark coolness of the overhanging trees the day was blinding and burning. And out in the full glare of sunlight the world was steeped in other scents, the smell of drying hay, the thick vanilla odour of meadow-sweet, the exotic heavenliness of lime trees.

The road went down to a village. There, at a white-washed public-house with red geraniums blazing

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vividly in the window-boxes, the brake pulled up to a
concert of cries and laughter.

'Whoa! What's the matter with you, old horses?
Whoa there! Are they teetotallers? Whoa!'

Shouting and laughing, the passengers began to
alight and vanish into the public-house. Those who did
not drink walked about to stretch their legs or stood in
the shade of the inn wall. Men reappeared from the
public-house doorway with glasses of golden beer, their
mouths ringed with beads of foam. From the tap-room
a bass voice boomed and pompommed deep impromptu
notes of noisy pleasure.

Henry got down from the brake and walked about
moodily. His father and mother stood in the shade,
each drinking a small lemonade.

'Get yourself a lemon, 'Enry, my boy,' said his father.

'No thanks.'

'Feel dicky?'

'I'm all right.'

'Liven yourself up then. Haven't lost nothing, have
you?'

'I'm all right,' said Henry.

He refused to sip of his mother's lemonade and
walked away. He felt bored, morose, out of touch with
everyone.

With relief he saw the passengers emerge from the
public-house and begin to climb back into the brake.
He climbed up also and found himself sitting, this
time, between a tall scraggy man with a peg-leg who

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gave off the mustily dry odour of leather, and a girl of his own age who was dressed as if she were going to a baptism, in a white silk dress, white straw hat, long white gloves that reached to her elbows, white cotton stockings, white shoes and a white sunshade which she carried elegantly over her left shoulder.

'Oh! It's going to be marvellous,' she said.

'What is?' he said, 'Don't poke me in the eye with that sunshade.'

'The choir, the house, everything.'

'Glad you think so,' he said.

The brake had begun to move again, the shouting and excited laughter of the passengers half drowning the girl's voice and his own. And above the din of the brake's departure there arose the sound of insistent argument.

'I tell you it's right! Seen it times with my own eyes.'

'You dreamt it.'

'Dreamt it! I *seen* it. Plain as a pikestaff.'

'In a churchyard? Tell your grandmother.'

'Well, if you don't believe me, will you bet on it? You're so cocky.'

'Ah, I'll bet you. Any money. Anything you like.'

'All right. You'll bet as what I've told you ain't on that tombstone in Polwick churchyard? You'll bet on that?'

'Ah! I'll bet you. And I *know* it ain't.'

'Well, go on. How much?'

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'Tanner.'

There were shouts of ironical laughter and reckless encouragement. A little black frizzy-haired man was bobbing excitedly up and down on the brake seat urging a large blond man wearing a cream tea-rose in his buttonhole to increase the bet. 'Go on. Make it sixpence ha'penny. You're so cocky. How can you lose? You know it ain't there, don't you? Go on.'

'Sixpence,' said the blond man. 'I said sixpence and I mean sixpence.'

'You'll go to ruin fast.'

'I dare say. But I said sixpence and I mean sixpence. And here's me money.'

'All right! Let the driver hold it.'

The blond man handed his money to the fishmonger, who had climbed up to sit by the driver, and then began to urge the little man:

'Give him your money. Go on. And say good-bye to it while you're at it. Go on, say good-bye to it. Ah, it's no use spitting on it. It's the last you'll ever see o' that tanner.'

'You're so cocky. Why didn't you bet a quid?'

'Ah, why didn't I?'

Up on the driving-seat the driver and the fishmonger rolled against each other in sudden storms of laughter. Women giggled and men called out to each other, making dark insinuations, urging the driver to stop at the churchyard.

Opposite Henry and the girl a handsome man with

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a dark moustache and wearing a straw hat at a devilish angle had rested his hand with a sort of stealthy non-chalance on the knee of a school teacher in pink. She in turn averted her eyes, trying to appear as though she were thinking profound, far-off, earnest thoughts.

‘What’s the matter?’ he said.

‘It’s so hot,’ she murmured.

‘So are you,’ he whispered.

The school teacher’s neck flushed crimson and the blood surged up into her face.

And as if to cover up her own embarrassment the girl at Henry’s side began to talk in a rather louder voice to him, but her prim banal voice became lost for him in the giggling and talking of the other passengers, the loud-voiced arguments about the bet, the everlasting sound of wheels and hoofs on the rough, sun-baked road. Down in the valley the sun seemed hotter than ever. The brake passed a group of haymakers resting and sleeping in the noon-heat under the shade of a great elm tree. They waved and called with sleepy greetings. A woman sitting among them suckling a baby looked up with sun-tired eyes. Further on a group of naked boys bathing in a sloe-fringed pond jumped up and down in the sun-silvered water and about the grass pond-bank, waving their wet arms and flagging their towels. In the brake there was a thin ripple of giggling, the women suddenly ducking their heads together and whispering with suppressed excitement. The blond man and the frizzy-haired dark man

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argued and taunted each other with unending but friendly vehemence. And under the intense sunshine and the dazzling fierce July light the slowness of the brake was intolerable. Up the hills it crawled as though the horses were sick. Down hill the brakes hissed and checked the wheels into the deathly pace of a funeral. Henry sat drugged by the heat and the wearisome pace of progress. Faintly, through the sun-heavy air, came the strokes of one o'clock from a church tower. Already it was as if the brake had travelled all day. And now, with the strokes of the clock dying away and leaving the air limitlessly silent beyond the little noises of the brake it seemed suddenly as if the journey might last for ever.

Twenty minutes later the brake went down hill through an avenue of elms towards a square church tower rising like a small sturdy grey fortress out of a village that seemed asleep except for a batch of black hens dust-bathing in the hot road. The sudden coming of the brake sent the fowls squawking and clattering away in panic-feathered half-flight.

'Ah! Your old horses are too slow for a funeral. Might have had a Sunday dinner for nothing if you'd been sharper. What d'ye feed 'em on? Too slow to run over an old hen. Gee there! Tickle 'em up a bit.' And mingled with these shouts the repeated cry:

'And don't forget to stop at the churchyard.'

The frizzy-haired man began to stand up and wave his arms. He became ironically tender towards the

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blond man. 'I feel sorry for you. It's like taking money from a kid. Pity your mother ever let you come out.' The blond man kept shaking his head with silent wisdom. The brake crawled slowly by the churchyard wall. 'A bit farther,' cried the dark man with excitement. 'T'other side o' that yew-tree. Gee up a bit.' The passengers were craning their necks, laughing, standing up, bantering remarks. With mock sadness the frizzy-haired man patted the blond man on the back, shaking his head. 'Feel sorry for you,' he said in a wickedly dismal voice. The blond man airily waved his hand with a gesture of pity. 'Not half so sorry as you'll feel for yourself in a minute,' he said.

The frizzy-haired man did not listen. He was beginning to survey the tombstones with great excitement, craning his neck. Suddenly the blond man seized him and held him aloft like a child.

'Now can you see, ducky?' he cried.

'A bit farther! Farther! Steady now. Whoa there! Whoa!'

The brake stopped. The small man wriggled down from the blond man's arms. There arose a pandemonium of laughter and shouts in the brake. The driver stood up and chinked the money in his hand. The small man spoke with twinkling irony.

'Oh! No, it ain't there, is it? It ain't there? It's melted. Well, well, I must be boss-eyed. The sun's so hot it's melted. Would you believe it? Fancy that. Just fancy that. It ain't there.'

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The blond man was staring with dumb gloom at a gravestone.

'What are you looking at?' began the small man mercilessly. 'What? — If it ain't a tombstone I'll never. Well, well!'

'I'll be damned,' the blond man was saying slowly. 'I'll be damned.'

'Read it!' yelled the little man in triumph.

'I've read it.'

'Read it out loud,'

'Ah, what d'ye take me for? Three pen'worth o' tripe? You read it.'

'All right. It's worth it.'" Solemnly the small man read out the rhyme on the tombstone:

*'Let wind go free where'er you be:
In chapel or in church.
For wind it was the death of me.'*

Suddenly the driver clicked at the horses and the brake jerked violently on. The women shrieked, the blond man sat disconsolate, the small man piped in triumph above the bubbling and spluttering of laughter.

Henry sat with a little smile on his lips, faintly aloof, his thoughts lofty and cool. He felt wonderfully above and detached from the puerile jokes and empty laughter of the rest of the brake, his brain manufacturing little self-conscious philosophies which seemed very clever, and when the mood seemed to be dying at last it was suddenly revived by the spectacle of his father

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standing up in the brake, signalling the driver to halt for a moment and delivering his final words of advice and admonition to the choir.

‘Well, we shall be there in a few more minutes. And I just want to remind you of a few things. We’ve had our little jokes. And now I want to be serious for ten seconds. This is a serious business. We are down to start singing at four o’clock. All hear that? Four o’clock. Four o’clock on the big lawn in front of the house. We shall start off with “Calm was the Sea”; and then after that it will be “On the Banks of Allan Water” and then last of all “My love is Like a Red, Red Rose”. We shall sing these three in the afternoon. And then in the evening, at seven o’clock, we shall sing a test piece chosen from one of these and three others. It might be one of these three. It might not. It might be anything. We don’t know. We’ve got to stand ready to sing anything at a moment’s notice.’ He waved his arms up and down constantly in his excitement. His voice was like that of a little chattering ventriloquist’s doll. ‘And one more thing. Remember the words. When it says “Calm was the Sea” don’t sing it as if it were “The Wreck of the Hesperus”, but sing it as if it were calm — calm and soft. Imagine it. Lovely day. Boats hardly moving. Softly, softly, does it, softly. Imagine it. Imagine you’re on Yarmouth pier if you like, looking at the sea. Water hardly moves. And then “the wandering breezes”. Soft again, very soft. Let them wander. Let them flow from

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you. And breezes — remember it's breezes. Not a thunderstorm. Still soft — you'll see in the copy is marked *dulce*. Italian word — means sweet, soft, gentle. Remember dulcimer. Close your eyes if you like. Sing it as if you was dreaming.' He closed his fair-lashed eyes and put on a wrapt, dreamy expression of soft ecstasy. 'Dah — dah-dah — daaah-dah!' he sang in a soft falsetto. 'Wand'ring bre-e-e-zes.' He opened his eyes. 'Feeling — that's it — feeling. Expression. That's everything. Anybody can bellow like a bull. But that's not singing. That's not interpretation. Not feeling. And don't be afraid of how you look. The judges aren't looking to see how pretty you are. They're *listening*. Well, make them listen, soft, softly does it, remember, softly.'

His voice trailed off to a fine whisper and he sat down. Henry smiled and the brake went on, the passengers in a changed mood after his father's words, the women tidying their hats and smoothing their stiff puff-sleeves and long dresses, the men fingering their buttonholes, clearing their throats and sitting in silence as though suddenly musingly nervous of the thought of the singing.

The country began to change also. The yellowing wheat-fields, the dark fields of roots shining and drooping in the hot sun, the parched hayfields and woods were replaced by an immense park of old dark trees under which the grass was still spring green and sweet. Far off, timid and startled, groups of young deer,

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palest brown against the dark tree-shadows, with an occasional dark antlered, resentful stag, stood and watched the brake go past with glassy, wondering eyes. Soon, through wider spaces between the trees, there was the big house itself, a square, stone tall-windowed place, with a carved stone balustrade round the lead roof and immense black cedars encircling the lawns. It looked cold and sepulchral even against the rich darkness of the trees in the hot sunlight.

The brake turned into the park through high iron gates on which the family crest blazed in scarlet and gold. It was as if it had driven into a churchyard. The passengers were suddenly transformed, sitting with a stiff, self-conscious silence upon them. As the brake drove along under a great avenue of elms extending like a sombre nave up to the lawns of the house, the horses fell into a walk. The fishmonger sat very upright on the driver's seat, preening his buttonhole, and the fat woman, sucking her last cachou quickly, wiped her lips clean with her handkerchief. The handsome young man in a rakish straw hat, taking his hand away from the school teacher's knee, ceased his seductive whispers. The carriage-drive emerged in an immense sweep from under the dark avenue into the sunlight and curved on between the lawns and the house. The brake pulled up behind a row of other brakes standing empty by a tall yew-hedge and the choir began to alight, the men handing down the ladies from the awkward back-step and the ladies giving little

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delicate shrieks and pretending to stumble. Henry's father dragged out from under the brake seat an immense portmanteau of music. From over the lawns gay with parasols and flowing frocks, there came a scent of new-mown grass and women's dresses, the swooning breath of lime trees and a hum of human voices like the sound of bees.

Across the lawn also came a man in an old panama hat, a yellowish alpaca suit and a faded green bow, beaming with smiles and gestures of aristocratic idiocy.

'Oh, pardon, pardon me!' he cried. 'But 'oo are you? Oh! Orpheus choir! Yes! Orpheus! Marvellous! T'ank you a t'ousand times for coming. Yes! And if you desire anyt'ing please come to me. Anyt'ing you like. Anyt'ing. And T'ank you a t'ousand times for coming! T'ank you a t'ousand times! And eez it not ze most marvellous day? Most marvellous!'

I I

In the full heat of the afternoon, tired from walking about the crowded lawns in the fierce sunshine and even more bored that he had been in the brake, Henry saw people passing in and out of the house through a side door on the terrace. Following them, he found himself in a wide lofty entrance hall that had about it the queer half-scented coolness of a church and the same hollow silence broken at intervals by the sound of

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voices and strange receding and returning echoes. He took off his straw hat and wiped his sweaty forehead with his handkerchief. The air felt as cool as a leaf on his hot face. In answer to his question a negative-faced manservant standing at ease like a tired soldier at the foot of a wide stone staircase told him that the house was open to visitors till five o'clock. He walked quietly up the stairs, his feet soundless on the heavy carpet, staring at the magnificence of gilded ceilings, dim tapestries, old dark portraits, immense sparkling chandeliers, touching the flower-smoothness of old chests and chairs with his finger-tips as he passed. Upstairs he went in and out of innumerable rooms, staring at vast canopied bedsteads, lacquered cabinets filled with never-opened books and fragile china, dim painted screens and ornate fireplaces of cold blue-veined marble. He wondered all the time who had ever lived and slept there, contrasting it all unconsciously with the room behind the shop at home, with the cheap German silk-fronted piano, the brass gas-brackets, the cane music-rack, the broken revolving piano stool, the flashy green jars containing aspidistras whose leaves his mother counted and sponged religiously every Saturday. The place had an air of unreality. The yellow blinds, drawn to keep out the sun, threw down a strange shadowy apricot light. Here and there rents in the blinds let in streaks of dusty sunlight. When he put his hand on the walls they struck cold and damp. Across the floors he

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noticed trails of candle-grease dropped perhaps by some servant coming in to lower the blinds at night or let them up again in the morning. How long ago? he wondered. There was a melancholy air of the past, of vague, dead, forgotten things. There was also a curious feeling of poverty about it all in spite of that rich magnificence. The blinds were old and stained, the paint was cracked and dirty, and here and there a ceiling had crumbled away, revealing naked laths draped with black skeins of cobweb.

Going slowly up the second flight of stairs, he stopped now and then to look at the prints on the walls. A clock in the house struck four, the notes very soft and delicate, a silver water-sound. Some visitors passed him, coming down, their voices dying away down the two flights of stairs like a vague chant. Going up, he found himself in a bare corridor.

Walking into a room by one door and out by another he turned along a narrow corridor in order to return to the stairs, but the passage seemed contained within itself, to lead nowhere. And in a moment he was lost. Trying to go back to the room through which he had come he tried a door, but it was locked. He began to try other doors, which were also locked. It was some minutes before he found a door which opened.

Relieved, he hurried through the room. But half-way across the floor, thinking of nothing but escaping by the opposite door, he was startled into a fresh panic by a voice:

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'But unfortunately, in bestowing these embraces, a pin in her ladyship's headdress slightly scratching the child's neck, produced from this pattern of gentleness, such violent screams, as could hardly be outdone by any creature professedly noisy. The mother's consternation was excessive; but it could not surpass the alarm. . . .'

At the word alarm he stopped. The voice stopped too. He felt himself break out into a prickling sweat. Across the room, with his thin fingers outstretched to a low wood fire, sat an old man in a torn red dressing-gown. He was sunk into a kind of sick trance. By his side there was a woman, a young woman. Arrested in the act of reading, she sat with her averted head still and intense, looking across the room with the blackest eyes he had ever seen, black not only with their own richness of colour but with an illimitable darkness of sheer melancholy.

'I'm lost,' Henry said.

'Lost?'

She stood upright as she echoed the word, rubbing the fingers of her left hand up and down the yellow leather binding of the book. Trying to face her he was sick with confusion. The old man turned stiffly and stared at him also. The old eyes were pale and vacuous.

Suddenly the woman smiled.

'It's all right,' she said.

For some reason or other Henry could not answer her. He stood half-foolishly hypnotized by her figure, tall and wonderfully slender, her very long maroon-coloured

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dress, her unspeakably brilliant eyes. Her voice had in it a kind of mournful sweetness which held him fascinated.

At last he attempted to explain himself. He had no sooner begun than she cut him short:

‘I’ll show you the way,’ she said.

He still could not answer. She turned to the old man:

‘Sit still. I’ll come back.’

‘Where are you going?’ he muttered querulously. ‘Who’s that young man?’

In one swift movement she turned from the old man to Henry and then back to the old man again, smiling at the youth with half-grave, half-vivacious eyes. And there was the same mischievous solemnity in her voice.

‘He’s the new gardener,’ she said.

‘Eh?’

‘The new gardener. Here, take the book. Read a little till I come back. From the top of the page there. You see?’

‘What? I’d like some tea.’

‘All right.’

‘It’s not so frightfully warm in here either,’ he said pettishly.

‘Keep your dressing-gown buttoned. You’re not likely to be warm. See, button it up.’

She fingered the buttons of his dressing-gown, quickly, impatiently. And then, while he still protested

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and complained, she walked swiftly across the room, opened the far door and vanished into the passage outside. In bewilderment Henry followed her. She shut the door quickly behind him.

'Well, now I'll see you out,' she said.

She began to walk away along the passage and he followed her, a step or two behind. She walked quickly with long, impatient steps, so that he had difficulty in keeping up.

They walked along in silence except for the sound of her dress swishing along the carpet until he recognized the window at which he had stood and looked down in the choir.

'I'm all right now,' he said. He began to utter dim thanks and apologies.

'Go and enjoy yourself,' she said. 'Have you seen the lake?'

'No,'

'Go and see it. Across the park and through the rhododendron plantation. You'll find it. It's lovely.'

Before he could speak again she had turned away. There was a brief flash of maroon in the passage, the sound of her feet running quickly after she had vanished. He waited a moment. But nothing happened, there was only a curious, almost audible hush everywhere. Outside the singing had ceased. He moved towards the stairs in a state of dejected and tense astonishment.

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III

The singing was over for the afternoon. There was nothing to do but wander about the lawns and terraces or take tea in the large flagged tea-tent. Privileged ladies were playing croquet on a small lawn under the main terrace, giggling nervously as they struck the bright-coloured balls. Gentlemen in straw boaters and pin-striped cream flannel trousers with wide silk waist-bands applauded their shots delicately. There was an oppressive feeling of summer languor, a parade of gay hats and parasols and sweeping dresses. Henry went into the tea-tent for a cup of tea to escape the boredom of it all. Coming out again he met the fishmonger.

‘Cheer up,’ said the fishmonger.

‘Oh! I’m all right.’ He put on a casual air. ‘I was wondering which was the way to the lake.’

‘The lake?’ said the fishmonger. His eyes began to dance like little bubbling peas as soon as he heard the word. The lake? What did he want with the lake? Becoming quite excited, he took hold of Henry’s coat-sleeve confidentially and led him across the lawn. So he wanted to know the way to the lake? Well! Very strange. He wondered what he wanted with the lake? Not for fish by any chance? Oh! no, not for fish. Perhaps he didn’t even know there were fish in the lake? Henry protested. He cut him short:

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'Ah, you're dark, you're dark.'

Finally, losing a little of his excitement, he began to tell him of the days when, as a young man, he had fished in the lake. Fish! They hadn't breathing room. They were the days. But now there hadn't been fish, not a solitary fish, not a stickleback, pulled out of that lake for twenty years. 'Not since old Antonio came.' It was a shame, wickedness. He began to talk with lugubrious regret. Who was Antonio? Henry asked. The fishmonger echoed the words with tenor astonishment, his voice squeaking. Antonio? Hadn't he seen him running about all over the place — 'T'ank you a t'ousand times! T'ank you a t'ousand times!' So that was Antonio? Yes, Antonio Serelli. It was he who was mad on singing and had the choirs come every summer. It was he who hadn't allowed a line in the lake for twenty years. 'In the old days you could give a keeper a drink and fish all day.' But not now. Antonio wouldn't allow it. The police had instructions to keep their eyes open for anyone carrying anything that looked like a rod. And Antonio would go mad if he heard a fish had been hooked. But then he was mad. They were all mad, the whole family, always had been. The girl and all.

'The girl?' Henry repeated. 'Who is she?'

'Maddalena?' The fishmonger shook his head. He didn't know anything about Maddalena. He'd never seen her. She never came out. He only knew old Antonio.

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'And what's their name?'

'Serelli.'

'Which must be Italian.'

'Half and half. Don't do to inquire too much into the ins and outs of the aristocracy.'

Finally he pointed out the path going down through a plantation of rhododendrons to the lake and Henry climbed over the high iron fence of the park.

'Keep your eyes open,' the fishmonger whispered. 'They say he's down there every night. Singing the fish to sleep I shouldn't wonder.'

Henry left him and walked down through the rhododendrons to the lake. It was larger than he had imagined, a wide oval of water, stretching for a quarter of a mile before him and on either hand. A thick wood came down on the opposite shore to the fringe of reeds and wild iris fronds. The water was still and smooth until a pair of wild duck, frightened by his coming, shot up and flew high and swift over the alders darkening the bank, their feet dripping silver, their long necks craned to the sun, their alarmed quack-quacking splitting the warm silence. The water-rings, undulating gently away, struck islands of water lilies with a soft flopping sound. Under the sun-shot water countless lily-buds were pushing up like dim magnolias and on the surface wide-open flowers floated like saucers of white and yellow china.

As he walked along the lakeside he could still hear the faint cries that rose from the crowded lawns, and

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now and then the clock of croquet balls. Hearing them he thought of how he had wandered about the lawns and gardens trying to find courage enough to go into the house again in the hope of seeing for a second time the girl who had been reading to the old man. He could not forget the melancholy intensity of her face. But when finally he had hurried along the terrace the door had been locked.

He walked along by the lake. The grass was spongy and noiseless to walk on, the air very still and warm under the shelter of the rhododendrons, and pigeons made a soft complaint in the silence.

Abruptly he was aware of something moving on the opposite bank. He half stopped and looked. It seemed like a group of yellow irises fluttered by a little deliberate wind. Then he saw that it was someone in a yellow dress. The sleeve was waving. He stopped quite still. The sleeve seemed to be making signals for him to go on.

He began to walk slowly along the bank and the woman on the opposite bank began to walk along in the same direction, hurrying. At the end of the lake, where the water sluiced in, was a wooden bridge. The woman began to run as she approached it. Her dress was very long and hampered her movements and she paused on the bridge to straighten her skirt and then hurried on again to meet him.

'You shouldn't come along here, you know,' she began to say, as she approached him.

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She seemed to be very agitated. Henry stopped. He felt that she had not recognized him.

'I am very sorry,' he said.

And then, perhaps because of his voice, she recognized him. Her face broke into a half smile, but the agitation remained:

'But you shouldn't, you shouldn't,' she kept saying.

'But it was you who told me to come.'

'It makes no difference.'

He did not speak. All this time they had stood at a distance from each other, four or five yards between them. Now she came nearer. In the house he had thought of her as very young, a girl. Now, as she came nearer, she seemed much older. He took her now for twenty-seven or eight. And perhaps because of the yellow dress she seemed darker too. Her eyes were utterly black, not merely dark, and brilliant without the faintest mistiness, like black glass. And she seemed taller also and her body finer in shape, again perhaps because of the yellow dress, and her skin had a kind of creamy duskiness, soft, very smooth, a rich duskiness that had covered also her heavy southern lips and her straight black hair.

Staring at her, he was still at a loss for something to say. She had begun to bite her lower lip, hard, making little white teeth-prints on the dusky flesh, as though in agitation or perplexity. And it occurred to him suddenly why she did not want him there. She had

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come down not to meet him, but someone else. And she was angry and troubled at finding him there.

'I'm very sorry,' he said again. 'But I'll go at once.'

He put his hand to his straw hat. She startled him by saying instantly:

'I'll walk back with you.' And then added: 'I'm going back the same way.'

It looked as if she didn't trust him. But he said nothing. A path slanted up the slope through the rhododendrons and they began to walk up it. The rhododendrons, old wild misshapen bushes, were full of withered seed-heads. He said something about their having looked wonderful in early summer. She did not answer. He thought she seemed preoccupied. Once, without stopping, she glanced back at the lake as though looking for someone, and as she turned back he remarked:

'It's been a wonderful day.'

'Yes,' she said. She said it unthinkingly, the word meant nothing. And suddenly she added:

'You think so?'

And, as she spoke, she was smiling, an extraordinary smile, vivacious, dark, allusive. It had in it something both tender and mocking.

'You don't think so?' she said.

'No, perhaps not.'

She seemed to feel instinctively that he was bored.

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He felt it. And he felt that she might have triumphed over him for knowing, but she said nothing, and they walked slowly on up the path.

All the time he wondered why she had been so agitated at finding him by the lake. And finally he asked.

'I didn't recognize you,' she said.

That was all. He didn't believe her. And she sensed his unbelief at once. She looked quickly at him and he smiled. She smiled in return, the same vivacious tender smile as before, and in a moment they were intimate. She said then:

'I didn't want you to get into any unpleasantness, that's all.'

'What unpleasantness?'

'Well, the lake is private. The fish are preserved and there are keepers and so on.'

He said nothing, but at heart he was disappointed at leaving the lake.

'You're not disappointed?' she said at once.

'Yes,' he said.

And then she did an extraordinary thing. She suddenly lifted her arms with a gesture of almost mocking abandonment and declared:

'All right. We'll go back.'

He protested. But she turned and began to walk back down the path to the lake, not heeding him. He turned and followed her, a yard or two behind, protesting again. And suddenly she let out a laugh and

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began to run. For a moment he stood still with astonishment and then he ran after her.

At the bottom of the path she paused and waited for him. She was still laughing.

'What shall we do?' she said recklessly. 'There's a punt. We could go out on the lake.'

'All right.' He was ready for anything.

And then, as suddenly as she had turned and run down the path, she was saying:

'No, I mustn't. You must excuse me. I must go back.'

'Don't go,' he said.

She caught the tone of entreaty in his voice. And it seemed to hurt her. Her eyes filled with pain, then abruptly with swimming wetness, and he stood still, too astounded to speak, while she bent her head and let the tears fall helplessly down her face. She began to cry with the helplessness of utter dejection, like someone worn out, not even lifting her hands to her face to hide it, but letting them hang spiritlessly at her side, not moving. She hardly made a sound, as though her tears were flooding away her strength. And when gradually she ceased crying and at last lifted her head she never uttered a word of apology or excuse or regret. But she gave him one amazing look, her black eyes swimming with many conflicting emotions; anger, helplessness, dejection, bitterness, fear and pain.

A moment later they were walking back up the path

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again. He could not speak. She dried her eyes with the sleeve of her dress, making a little yellow handkerchief of it. He felt that there was something unforgettably strange and touching about her, about her beauty, her amazing changes of mood, her tears and her silence.

And just as he had given up the idea of her ever speaking again, she made a sort of excuse, half for her tears, half for her behaviour on first seeing him:

'My brother might be very angry if he knew people had been down by the lake. And that might mean the end of the singing contests.'

That was all. It was very lame, very unconvincing, but he said:

'I understand.'

She must have felt that the excuse was poor and that he didn't understand, for a moment later she began to tell him, half apologetically, something about her brother: of how he was passionately fond of music, of singing especially. Twenty years before, her father had brought her mother to live there. Her father had been an English doctor and her mother Italian, an opera singer, a very gay woman, but a little irresponsible. Now that her father and mother were dead the brother and sister lived alone in the place and the brother devoted himself to music.

'He lives for nothing else,' she concluded.

She told him all this quietly, a little disjointedly, offering it as an excuse. But there was a curious

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bitterness in her voice, sharpest when she said 'He lives for nothing else.' He said nothing at all and by the time she had finished speaking they had reached the crest of the path.

There they paused. Across the park, through the thick summer trees, they could see the tent with its flags, the fluttering panorama of dresses across the lawns, the flowers on the terraces. And as they stood there the evening singing began, the harmony of male voices low and soft but very clear on the still evening air. They listened a moment; the choir was singing 'Calm was the Sea', and the voices, falling, crooned away almost to silence. There was a gate in the iron fence beyond the rhododendrons. The woman put her hand on the latch and he pushed it open and she slipped through and before he could say anything she smiled and was going away in the direction of the trees.

Just before she disappeared she turned as if to wave her hand and then, as though remembering something, she let it fall loosely to her side.

I V

It was nearly midnight, the sky was clear and dark, a pattern of blue and starlight. Down the avenue of elms the line of conveyances gave departing winks of light. The horses hoofs made hollow clock-clocking echoes under the roof of thick leaves. The air was still

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warm. There was a scent of limes, an odour of horses, an acrid whiff of candles from the carriage lamps. Above the noises of departure a thin emascuate voice kept piping continually:

'T'ank you a t'ousand times! T'ank you a t'ousand times. T'ank you so much.'

It was all over. Henry was in the brake, squeezed between the fishmonger and the school teacher who sat half lost already in a pair of dark entwining arms; the brake was moving away, the lamplight was shining down the avenue, the lawn with its web of fairy-lights, azure and red and emerald and gold, was receding, fading, vanishing at last.

'Well, it's been a grand day. And if you ask me we done well. Yes, it's been grand. I'm satisfied. I shan't be sorry when I'm going up wooden hill, now. I like my rest.' The voices of the women were tired, disjointed, the words broken by yawns. A mutter of dissatisfaction ran among the men. They had won the second prize, there had been some unfairness, they had expected the first, they were sure of it, they had sung beautifully. The judges were too old, they were finicky, they had been prejudiced. The voices of the men, discussing it, were petty, regretful. 'A day wasted, I call it.' Little arguments flamed up in the darkness. 'Ah! not so strong. It's been grand.' Jokes cracked out, someone made the sweet wet sound of a kiss, laughter flickered and died, the petty arguments were renewed. A woman suddenly complained: 'There! and I forgot

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my honeysuckle,' and a voice quietened her from the darkness: 'Come here and I'll give you something sweeter'n honeysuckle.'

The brake went slowly on into dark vague country. The night was warm and soundless, the houses were little grey haystacks clustered together, the woods were blacker and deeper. It was like a tranquil dream: the lovely glitter of summer starlight, the restfulness of the dark sky after the glare of sunshine.

Henry sat silent, only half-conscious of what the voices about him said. He was thinking of the woman: he could see her in the room with the old man, he could see her crying by the lake and half-waving her hand. He could see her clearly and could hear her voice unmistakably; yet he felt at times that she had never existed.

The fishmonger broke in upon his thoughts, his breath sweetish with wine, his voice a little thick and excited:

'Remember I was tellin' you about old Fiddlesticks, Antonio? I been havin' a glass o' wine with him.'

Henry only nodded.

'Would make me have it. Dragged me into the house. Drawing-room. Kept shaking hands wimme. Nice fellow, old Antonio. You'd like him. Nice wine an' all — beautiful — like spring water. Made your heart sing, fair made your heart sing.'

His voice trailed off and he sat silent, as though over-awed by these memories. Thinking of the woman,

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Henry said nothing. His mind puzzled over her with tender perplexity. Who was she? Why had she wept? What was she doing now?

The fishmonger broke in again, a little garrulously:

'Did I tell you the old man came in? No? Came in about half-way through the second glass. Dirty old dressing-gown, all gravy and slobber down the front. I tell you, nobody knows how the rich live only those who do know. Had the girl with him. In a yellow dress. Know who I mean? The girl who never comes out, never goes nowhere.'

Henry was listening now. He listened a little incredulously, but gradually there crept into the fishmonger's voice a quality of earnestness, of sober truth:

'I know now why that girl never goes out. Do you know — she didn't drink. That was funny. She just sat looking at the old man. I should like you to have seen her looking at him.'

'How did she look at him?'

'Just as if she hated him. Every time he slopped his wine down his dressing-gown she looked just as if she would shriek. And then another funny thing happened. She went out. Just as if she couldn't bear it no longer.'

'Went out?' His heart was beginning to beat with a curious excitement.

'Yes — and then, perhaps you won't believe me, the old man went mad. Raving mad, all because she'd gone. Jealousy! That's all. Mad with jealousy. In the end he went clean off — sort of fit, and Antonio and

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me had to rub his hands and get him round. Old Antonio was very upset. Kept apologizing to me. "Excuse," he kept saying. "Excuse. He is so jealous about her. He never wants her out of his sight. And she is so young. And then she is a woman of great imagination." What did he mean by that? — a woman of great imagination?" The fishmonger broke out in answer to himself, in a little burst of disgusted fury:

'Imagination! It needed a bit of imagination to marry that old cock.'

The brake had reached the crest of the hill and had begun to descend on the other side. The dew, falling softly, was turning the air a little cooler. The figures in the brake were silent, the lovers enfolded each other. A clock chimed its quarters over the still fields, the fishmonger took out his watch and verified it and dropped it back into his pocket.

'Half-past one,' he murmured.

Henry was silent and as the brake drove steadily on there was a sense of morning in the air in spite of the stars, the silence and the darkness.

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SITTING on an iron seat fixed about the body of a great chestnut tree breaking into pink-flushed blossom, two old men gazed dumbly at the sunlit emptiness of a town square.

The morning sun burned in a sky of marvellous blue serenity, making the drooping leaves of the tree most brilliant and the pale blossoms expand to fullest beauty. The eyes of the old men were also blue, but the brilliance of the summer sky made a mockery of the dim and somnolent light in them. Their thin white hair and drooping skin, their faltering lips and rusted clothes, the huddled bones of their bodies had come to winter. Their hands tottered, their lips were wet and dribbling, and they stared with a kind of earnest vacancy, seeing the world as a stillness of amber mist. They were perpetually silent, for the deafness of one made speech a ghastly effort of shouting and mis-interpretation. With their worn sticks between their knees and their worn hands knotted over their sticks they sat as though time had ceased to exist for them.

Nevertheless every movement across the square was an event. Their eyes missed nothing that came within sight. It was as if the passing of every vehicle held for them the possibility of catastrophe; the appearance of a strange face was a revolution; the apparitions of young

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ladies in light summer dresses gliding on legs of shell-pink silk had on them something of the effect of goddesses on the minds of young heroes. There were, sometimes, subtle changes of light in their eyes.

Across the square, they observed an approaching figure. They watched it with a new intensity, exchanging also, for the first time, a glance with one another. For the first time also they spoke.

'Who is it?' said one.

'Duke, ain't it?'

'Looks like Duke,' the other said. 'But I can't see that far.'

Leaning forward on their sticks, they watched the approach of this figure with intent expectancy. He, too, was old. Beside him, indeed, it was as if they were adolescent. He was patriarchal. He resembled a biblical prophet, bearded and white and immemorial. He was timeless.

But though he looked like a patriarch he came across the square with the haste of a man in a walking race. He moved with a nimbleness and airiness that were miraculous. Seeing the old men on the seat he waved his stick with an amazing gaiety at them. It was like the brandishing of a youthful sword. Ten yards away he bellowed their names lustily in greeting.

'Well Reuben boy! Well Shepherd!'

They mumbled sombrely in reply. He shouted stentoriously about the weather, wagging his white beard strongly. They shifted stiffly along the seat

and he sat down. A look of secret relief came over their dim faces, for he had towered above them like a statue in silver and bronze.

'Thought maybe you warn't coming,' mumbled Reuben.

'Ah! been for a sharp walk!' he half-shouted. 'A sharp walk!'

They had not the courage to ask where he had walked but in his clear brisk voice he told them, and deducing that he could not have travelled less than six or seven miles they sat in gloomy silence, as though shamed. With relief they saw him fumble in his pockets and bring out a bag of peppermints, black-and-white balls sticky and strong from the heat of his strenuous body, and having one by one popped peppermints into their mouths they sucked for a long time with toothless and dumb solemnity, contemplating the sunshine.

As they sucked, the two old men waited for Duke to speak, and they waited like men awaiting an oracle, since he was, in their eyes, a masterpiece of a man. Long ago, when they had been napkinned and at the breast, he had been a man with a beard, and before they had reached their youth he had passed into a lusty maturity. All their lives they had felt infantile beside him.

Now, in old age, he persisted in shaming them by the lustiness of his achievements and his vitality. He had the secret of a devilish perpetual youth. To them the world across the square was veiled in sunny mistiness, but

Duke could detect the swiftness of a rabbit on a hillside a mile away. They heard the sounds of the world as though through a stone wall, but he could hear the crisp bark of a fox in another parish. They were condemned to an existence of memory because they could not read, but Duke devoured the papers. He had an infinite knowledge of the world and the freshest affairs of men. He brought them, every morning, news of earthquakes in Peru, of wars in China, of assassinations in Spain, of scandals among the clergy. He understood the obscurest movements of politicians and explained to them the newest laws of the land. They listened to him with the devoutness of worshippers listening to a preacher, regarding him with awe and believing in him with humble astonishment. There were times when he lied to them blatantly. They never suspected.

As they sat there, blissfully sucking, the shadow of the chestnut-tree began to shorten, its westward edge creeping up, like a tide, towards their feet. Beyond, the sun continued to blaze with unbroken brilliance on the white square. Swallowing the last smooth grain of peppermint Reuben wondered aloud what time it could be.

"Time?" said Duke. He spoke ominously. "Time?" he repeated.

They watched his hand solemnly uplift itself and vanish into his breast. They had no watches. Duke alone could tell them the passage of time while appearing to mock at it himself. Very slowly he drew out an

immense watch, held it out at length on its silver chain, and regarded it steadfastly.

They regarded it also, at first with humble solemnity and then with quiet astonishment. They leaned forward to stare at it. Their eyes were filled with a great light of unbelief. The watch had stopped.

The three old men continued to stare at the watch in silence. The stopping of this watch was like the stopping of some perfect automaton. It resembled almost the stopping of time itself. Duke shook the watch urgently. The hand moved onward for a second or two from half-past three and then was dead again. He lifted the watch to his ear and listened. It was silent.

For a moment or two longer the old man sat in lugubrious contemplation. The watch, like Duke, was a masterpiece, incredibly ancient, older even than Duke himself. They did not know how often he had boasted to them of its age and efficiency, its beauty and pricelessness. They remembered that it had once belonged to his father, that he had been offered incredible sums for it, that it had never stopped since the battle of Waterloo.

Finally Duke spoke. He spoke with the mysterious air of a man about to unravel a mystery. 'Know what 'tis?'

They could only shake their heads and stare with the blankness of ignorance and curiosity. They could not know.

Duke made an ominous gesture, almost a flourish, with the hand that held the watch. 'It's the lectric.'

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They stared at him with dim-eyed amazement.

'It's the lectric,' he repeated. 'The lectric in me body.'

Shepherd was deaf. 'Eh?' he said.

'The lectric,' said Duke significantly, in a louder voice.

'Lectric?' They did not understand and they waited.

The oracle spoke at last, repeating with one hand the ominous gesture that was like a flourish.

'It stopped yesterday. Stopped in the middle of me dinner,' he said. He was briefly silent. 'Never stopped as long as I can remember. Never. And then stopped like that, all of a sudden, just at pudden-time. Couldn't understand it. Couldn't understand it for the life of me.'

'Take it to the watch maker's?' Reuben said.

'I did,' he said 'I did. This watch is older'n me, I said, and it's never stopped as long as I can remember. So he squinted at it and poked it and that's what he said.'

'What?'

'It's the lectric, he says, that's what it is. It's the lectric — the lectric in your body. That's what he said. The lectric.'

'Lectric light?'

'That's what he said. Lectric. You're full o' lectric, he says. You go home and leave your watch on the shelf and it'll go again. So I did.'

The eyes of the old men seemed to signal intense

questions. There was an ominous silence. Finally, with the watch still in his hand, Duke made an immense flourish, a gesture of serene triumph.

'And it went,' he said, 'It went!'

The old men murmured in wonder.

'It went all right. Right as a cricket! Beautiful!'

The eyes of the old men flickered with fresh amazement. The fickleness of the watch was beyond the weakness of their ancient comprehension. They groped for understanding as they might have searched with their dim eyes for a balloon far up in the sky. Staring and murmuring they could only pretend to understand.

'Solid truth,' said Duke. 'Goes on the shelf but it won't go on me. It's the lectric.'

'That's what licks me,' said Reuben, 'the lectric.'

'It's me body,' urged Duke. 'It's full of it.'

'Lectric light?'

'Full of it. Alive with it.'

He spoke like a man who had won a prize. Bursting with glory, he feigned humility. His white beard wagged lustily with pride, but the hand still bearing the watch seemed to droop with modesty.

'It's the lectric,' he boasted softly.

They accepted the words in silence. It was as though they began to understand at last the lustiness of Duke's life, the nimbleness of his mind, the amazing youthfulness of his patriarchal limbs.

The shadow of the chestnut-tree had dwindled to a

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small dark circle about their seat. The rays of the sun were brilliantly perpendicular. On the chestnut-tree itself the countless candelabra of blossoms were a pure blaze of white and rose. A clock began to chime for noon.

Duke, at that moment, looked at his watch, still lying in his hand.

He started with instant guilt. The hands had moved miraculously to four o'clock and in the stillness of the summer air he could hear the tick of wheels.

With hasty gesture of resignation he dropped the watch into his pocket again. He looked quickly at the old men, but they were sunk in sombre meditation. They had not seen or heard.

Abruptly he rose. 'That's what it is,' he said. 'The lectric.' He made a last gesture as though to indicate that he was the victim of some divine manifestation. 'The lectric,' he said.

He retreated nimbly across the square in the hot sunshine and the old men sat staring after him with the innocence of solemn wonder. His limbs moved with the haste of a clockwork doll and he vanished with incredible swiftness from sight.

The sun had crept beyond the zenith and the feet of the old men were bathed in sunshine.

A GERMAN IDYLL

I

A WHITE river steamer was travelling smoothly up the Rhine in the heat of an August afternoon. The sky was very blue and brilliant and far away and the sun was burning like a flaming ball of brass over the hills on the southern bank of the stream. The steamer, like a comet, left behind it a white tail of foam, but the smooth water was coloured a soft green, very clear and beautiful, as though stained to its depths with the reflected green of the vineyards terracing the high slopes on either side. As the slopes went smoothly past an occasional solitary peasant working high up among the vines would appear and wave his arm at the steamer and the passengers would wave their hands languidly in reply. Sometimes the steamer would overtake a slower steamer or would meet another advancing tranquilly downstream. The trembling white reflections of the boats, the threshed white foam on the water, the laughter and the waving of hands among the passengers all produced a sensation of great excitement when one boat passed another. Travelling up and down the river also were long chains of barges, often as many as ten in a chain, black and sluggish in the water with their merchandise. The foremost barge was often a family affair; there would be a big woman

in a dirty blouse and kerchief, and a string of children hanging over the side watching the steamer out of sight. The children and the women and the bargees themselves would all wave their hands and smile shyly and rather sweetly as though having their portraits taken. Sometimes there appeared narrow beaches of white sand peopled with colonies of holiday-makers lying half-naked and very brown in the hot sun. Groups of brown swimmers would race each other almost to within the path of the steamer, and occasionally light canoes, each propelled by a man and a girl, extremely serious and brown and beautiful, would dart alongside or bob across the white wake of foam. The paddlers seemed to regard the steamer with indifference and contempt, for they never turned their heads to look at it and never waved their hands. The bodies of the girls were marvellously tanned and slender and they had short yellow hair and fine breasts that hung loose in their white singlets as they leaned forward over the paddles.

A young man was sitting in the bows of the steamer. He was not more than twenty-two or three and he had brown, very English-looking hair, a thin sunburnt face and sensitive blue eyes that looked a little tired. He was travelling on the Rhine for the first time in his life. The broad hills reminded him of the hills of Derbyshire, but there was something quite foreign and dream-like to him about the peasants, the endless vineyards and the immensity of the Rhine itself. He felt drowsy

with the heat of the afternoon, the stream flowing sleepily past and the sunlight blinking like quicksilver on the green water.

Presently he closed his eyes and sat for what seemed a long time in a sort of half-sleep, conscious of nothing but the motion of the steamer, the voices about him on the deck and the jingling of a gramophone playing somewhere in the stern. He was aroused by a sudden commotion. The passengers were thronging to the taffrail and he heard a sudden clicking of many cameras. He sat up. At that moment a pair of prismatic glasses was put into his hands and an excited voice with a faint German accent exclaimed:

'Richardson, the Lorelei, quick, quick, the Lorelei.'

He automatically raised the glasses to his eyes. He had a sleepy impression of rocky slopes and afterwards of terraces of vineyards which seemed to come down to within touching distance until he could see the sunlight fretting the under-branches of the trees with soft shapes of gold and the green clusters of grapes standing out from among the vine leaves. The vines had been sprayed, so that the leaves were clouded over with a delicate vitriol-blue, like a lovely vapour. He had an impression also that the horizon was blurred with the haze of a thunderstorm. He lowered the glasses at last and looked up at the man who had thrust them into his hands. He was leaning on the taffrail, turning over the leaves of a Baedeker. The young man touched his arm with the glasses.

'Look at the storm,' he said.

The other took the glasses and became engrossed in the Rhine unfolding itself ahead and the blue haze or the gathering storm beyond. There was a brief silence and at last the young man spoke.

'What time shall we be in Iben?' he said.

The other did not answer and presently the young man repeated:

'Karl, what time shall we be in Iben?'

'Soon.'

'Before night?'

'Naturally.'

'You think so? No humbug this time?'

'Naturally.'

The tone of the answers was nonchalant and evasive, and the young man regarded his friend in silence. He was a man of thirty-five or six, tall, dark, angular, with a large arresting head covered with a crop of thick black hair that strayed over his ears and neck in tiny black curls. His broad heavy nose, his deep forehead and the large angle of his chin, all created an impression of great strength. By contrast his eyes were soft and timid and at moments he resembled strikingly some picture of the traditional Christ.

Karl had run away from Germany in order to go to London twenty years before. He was going back to his native village for the first time and the young man was going with him. He was a bookseller, carrying on his trade in a little shop like a rabbit-hutch in a street

off Lincoln's Inn. He spoke English fluently and by a half-fierce, half-gentle personality, an extremely blasphemous and entertaining speech and a gift for friendship he had made friends with every kind of person in every quarter of London. He lived with a fierce, tireless energy, rushing from place to place without rest, existing on nothing but his books, occasional ham sandwiches and snatched cups of tea. Every day he bicycled about the streets of London in order to buy his stock; the bicycle was rusty and broken and had cost him eighteenpence in an East End market; Karl rode it furiously, with a kind of half-athletic, half-religious diligence, using his feet for brakes. He was never tired and he never rested. On the night-boat from Gravesend to Rotterdam he had kept the young man awake with wild stories and readings from strange poets and fantastic blasphemies whenever the ship rolled. After leaving Holland, where fields of scarlet dahlias and the first asters were coming into bloom, he had insisted on travelling long distances by train into the heart of Germany, so that the young man had grown too tired and too hungry even to look at the passing forest or the fields of harvesters, gay in scarlet skirts and embroidered blouses, working among the ripe corn in the blazing sunshine. Sometimes it happened that they changed trains at a country station; there would be a red-roofed village set among wooded hills rising on either side, and the platform would be thronged with fat, gentle-eyed peasant women dressed

in countless snow-white petticoats and black velvet bodices, carrying baskets of cheeses wrapped in muslin, and live geese and eggs and wine. It would have been a sublime relief to have left the train and rested there. But the sight of his native land had filled Karl with the inexhaustible eagerness of a tourist. In four days they had travelled over half the country, riding third and fourth class in trains that crawled like caterpillars. They had seen all the towns where Karl had been apprenticed or where he had run a race or where he had fallen in love. The young man was stiff with sitting for long hours in trains and tired from running after trains and spending nights in strange beds from which Karl aroused him too early, so that they might catch other trains before breakfast. At first he had tried to protest but later he had no strength to protest. As he sat on the deck of the steamer he was utterly weary of travelling and there was only one thing to which he felt he could look forward. They were going into the country.

The steamer turned a bend in the river and slowly the Rhine straightened itself out again. The sky was dark and heavy with thunder over the distant breadth of the river. The steamer and the storm seemed to be floating towards each other at the same smooth, inevitable pace. Richardson tried to establish the point where the storm and the steamer would meet but his thoughts wandered off to Iben, the place where Karl had been born. He imagined a sleepy village lying in a fertile valley in the shelter of a forest of pines, the

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valley set with orchards and tobacco-fields and vine-yards and crops of wheat and rye turning white in the hot sun.

A short German dressed in a white, pink-striped flannel suit staggered on deck with his baggage and his wife. The woman, who was eating sausage sandwiches, seemed afraid of the approaching storm. She breathed like a broken-winded horse and there were beads of yellow sweat on her large moonlike face. As she ate the sausage she picked off the circle of red skin and threw it into the Rhine and the skin floating on the greenish water had a strange scarlet brilliance in the thunderlight.

The roofs of Bingen appeared, sharply outlined beneath the immense blue cloud of the thunderstorm. Afar off there had been a mutter of thunder and suddenly there was a louder peal which seemed to hesitate and hover in the sky before taking an angry leap into the distance, travelling away over the hills like a growl of artillery. The air was stifling. The German asked Karl if he thought they would be in Bingen before the storm came and Karl said 'Yes', in a tone as though the storm were a hundred miles away. The light was queer and brilliant. The vines were a wonderfully bright emerald and the river itself looked leaden and sombre under the darkening sky. The steamer slowed down its engines and drifted towards the red roofs and the storm. There was a strange stillness in the air, a hush that seemed to exist apart from the voices of the passengers, the tune of the gramophone still playing, and the quiet wash of water in the

steamer's wake. The German stood ready with his baggage and his wife had ceased eating. Suddenly the white thunder rain came racing down the river and whipped across the deck. The passengers herded themselves below and Richardson and Karl went down into the saloon. The sun was still shining as the rain came down and the air was like a curtain of silver. Karl ordered some beer and while he was drinking it the rain ceased with a jerk and the storm-cloud seemed to split apart and let in the light again.

Karl and Richardson went on deck again. There was a marvellous stillness in the air, and up in the black sky hung a magnificent rainbow. It made a span between the town and the hills like a vivid, exquisite bridge. There was a soft reflection of it on the water and another reflection of it higher up in the sky. Everyone came on deck to look at it and the stout German and his frau forgot to eat the sandwiches at the sight of it. Its loveliness was unearthly and transcendent.

The steamer swung across the river and came to rest at the landing-stage. The sun was shining brilliantly again and the rainbow had begun to fade.

Karl and Richardson went up into the town. Great pools of rain lay among the cobbles of the streets and the town looked washed and bright. Karl went into a shop for some cigars and made inquiries about a bus to Iben. There was no bus to Iben but there was a bus in fifteen minutes that would drop them within three miles of it. They hurried across the town and through

some public gardens. There was no time to eat. In the gardens some children under a mulberry tree were searching among the grass for the mulberries that the storm had beaten down. Richardson felt famished. He went across to a child and held out his hand. He could not speak a word of German. The child put a mulberry into his hand. He ate it and held out his hand again and the child gave him four mulberries more.

The mulberries tasted of rain and the taste of them was still in his mouth as he climbed into the bus and sat down.

Finally, when the bus started and they drove away out of the town, he turned and looked back. He could see the children and the mulberry tree and the hills beyond the Rhine but the rainbow had vanished from the sky.

II

It was late afternoon when they left the bus and began to walk along the road to Iben. The road travelled along for a mile in the shelter of a wooded rise and curved at last into an expanse of open country. There were fruit trees growing among the patches of wheat and rye and sometimes copses of birch broke up the line of the land gently rising and falling away to the horizon where the forest began. Where the corn was ripe and heavy the thunderstorm had flattened it to the earth in broad waves. The sun was hot and brilliant again but the air was fresh and sweetly scented

after the storm and the roadside was gay with beds of wild yellow snapdragon and scarlet poppies and stars of chicory washed very pure and shining by the rain.

The road turned sharply and mounted another spur of rising ground and beyond lay another valley and in the valley there were the red roofs and the spire of Iben.

They walked down into the village without speaking. The road was lined with trees of apple and pear and the rain had battered the ripe fruit to the earth. Richardson picked up a pear and ate it and Karl fixed his eyes on the village ahead. A solitary old woman in a white kerchief working on a patch of maize lifted her head and shaded her eyes in wonder and suspicion and watched them out of sight. They came down into Iben without seeing another soul. The street was steep and long and the houses rose up immense and gaunt on either side, rather forbidding and gloomy except for the bright green jalousies thrown back against the walls of dark stone and the little painted white balconies at the bedroom windows. The street was shadowy and deserted and the high wooden doors of the courtyards were shut. A stream of water flowed down the street, washing the cobbles a pale yellow. Nothing else moved. They came to a halt before a tall house with a great courtyard and high doors and a grape-vine spreading massive branches over the walls.

Richardson felt a sense of relief and he turned to look back as Karl walked towards the doors of the courtyard. He was astonished to find that the silence

and solitude of the street had vanished. Every door and window was crowded with gaping peasants and the street was suddenly all life and curiosity and excitement. He took one look at the chattering heads and turned to speak to Karl, but Karl had already opened the wicket of the house with the grape-vine.

He walked after him and stepped into the courtyard. The peasants came hurrying down the street to take a last look at him. Karl shut the door. The courtyard was flanked on one side by the south face of the house and on the other by stone cow-barns and open sheds under which a litter of sandy-coloured pigs were feeding. A big manure heap stood steaming in the centre of the yard and red and white hens were pecking about it in the sunshine. On the steps of the house a fair-haired girl of thirteen or fourteen was stirring something in a big brown bowl. She looked up with a start. She stared at Karl and Richardson with an expression of absolute wonderment, momentarily petrified. Then suddenly she dropped the bowl on the steps and ran like a wild creature into the house.

'They don't expect me,' said Karl. 'I didn't trouble to write.'

They heard the girl talking excitedly in the house and they walked a few paces forward. Suddenly she returned. A thin, deep-eyed peasant woman, sixty or so, was coming after her, timid and bewildered as a child, and behind her two other women of thirty or thirty-five, stout and moon-faced and astonished. The

old woman hesitated for one moment at the sight of Karl and then ran forward and began kissing him. She cried and laughed a little together and the other women came forward and kissed him and laughed, too. The young girl hung back and stared with wide eyes, as the wicket gate was pushed open and a little group of peasants came and stood in the courtyard and looked timidly on at it all.

'My mother,' said Karl. 'My sister Maria and my sister Elsa.'

Richardson shook hands with the three women. They looked at him shyly and worshipfully. The young girl ran like wildfire across the courtyard and scattered the peasants and vanished into the street slamming the wicket behind her. Everyone talked excitedly. There was a light of joyful astonishment on the faces of the three women as they led the way into the house and made Karl and Richardson sit on an old horsehair sofa in the kitchen, while they themselves ran hither and thither and clattered crockery and ground coffee and broke eggs and chattered as though the sight of Karl after twenty years had driven them mad.

The kitchen was large and dim, with a long scrubbed wooden table in the centre of it, a life-size picture of Hindenburg on one wall and a fireplace raised up, like a blacksmith's forge, in one corner. The old woman brought a great blue bowl to the table and broke eggs into it while she gazed and chattered at Karl like a child. He returned her gaze with absolute bewilderment.

ment, as though like her unable to believe in his presence there. The old woman seemed to break eggs enough for an army, and at every egg she made a long excited speech. Richardson sat still, not understanding a word. The kitchen was fragrant with coffee. The young girl came back and talked excitedly and took the bowl from the old woman and finished beating the eggs. When Richardson looked at her she flushed crimson and bent her head over the bowl. The two sisters ran backwards and forwards as though lost, coming to snatch away the bowl of eggs and lay the cloth on the table and set out cups and plates and wine glasses. Maria ran in with a bottle of wine. Finally the wine was poured out, a soft rose-coloured wine, clouding the glasses, and the old woman and Karl and Richardson stood up and drank. The wine was strong and sharp and as cold as snow. Richardson, glad of it, drank quickly and Maria pounced on the bottle and filled his glass immediately.

Elsa ran in with a dish filled with a single enormous omelette big enough for ten men and Maria with a tall green-patterned coffee-pot and long loaves of wheat and rye bread. Richardson sat at the table with Karl and ate. The three women hovered about them and talked inexhaustibly. The omelette was good. He had never tasted an omelette like it, very delicate and rich after the icy sharpness of the wine.

While they were eating there was a commotion in the yard outside. The women began fluttering and

Karl stood up. A man of fifty-five or sixty appeared at the doorway and after him two boys of eighteen and twenty. The man was dark and moustached, with the same soft grey eyes as Karl, the same broad forehead, and the same impression of gentleness and strength. He was dressed in working clothes and a full peaked cap. He looked like any small English tenant-farmer who has worked and struggled. The sun had dried his face into a thousand wrinkles and the soil seemed to have eaten eternally into the wrinkles, as though it could never wear away again.

He came into the kitchen and Karl went forward to meet him. The son and the father shook hands. The man smiled in the shy soft peasant-fashion, but there was no demonstration. They conveyed a feeling of gladness by a dumb unblinking look at each other.

The two boys came forward. They had the same brown wondrous-eyed peasant faces as the women, but they looked wilder and darker. Their boots and leggings were plastered with yellow mud and they brought with them a smell of earth and cows and ripened corn.

They stared at Karl and he stared at them. They were his brothers and they had been born after he had run away and he did not know them. They looked guilty and hesitant, as though they had heard and believed all the tales about him, the prodigal, who had run away and would never come back. But at last they came to him and shook hands. They tried to throw off their shyness and shake hands as brothers, but they

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seemed like strangers, and there was suddenly a queer silence in the kitchen and finally the old woman began weeping and hurried away.

The man and the sons shook hands with Richardson and gradually the old air of gaiety returned. Maria hurried in with wine again and the young girl began to break fresh eggs into the blue bowl. Soon another omelette appeared and plates of *kuchen* and cheese. The man and the boys sat down and ate, too. There was a noisy confusion of eating and laughter, of popping corks and frizzling eggs and strange peasants rushing in from the courtyard to ask about the strangers, and women rushing upstairs and down again as though madly chasing each other.

Soon afterward the old woman appeared again. Her tears were dry but she looked round the room in consternation, and Richardson saw her whispering with Elsa and Maria. A moment later Elsa and the young girl hurried off across the courtyard.

He was feeling muddled and talkative and very happy when they returned. He had a vague impression of another conversation among the women, many looks of relief and joy, and of the mother whispering hurriedly with Karl.

Finally Karl turned to him and said:

'They were worried because they haven't a bed for you here. There is room for me but they would like it if you would sleep at the inn.'

'All right.'

'They want us to go down there to-night and celebrate. They'll take your things down and we needn't go until later. You'll be all right at the inn.'

'I don't care where I sleep as long as I do sleep.'

'You'll sleep all right.'

Karl turned to speak to his mother, and Richardson became suddenly aware of a fresh face at the doorway. His bag was standing on the steps where he had left it and he had a hasty impression of Maria and Elsa talking to someone who in turn picked up his bag and took it away.

He saw a moment later a young girl crossing the courtyard. She was dressed in a loose white blouse and black skirt and bodice. She was very fair and slender. He did not see her face and she had crossed the courtyard with his bag and had vanished before he could look at her again.

III

They went down to the inn as darkness was falling. Maria and Elsa and Karl's mother had dolled themselves up in white blouses and thick black skirts and had scrubbed their faces until they looked rather like prim, pink-and-white dolls in half-mourning. The men were wearing dark, ill-fitting best suits and awkward white collars, and Karl's father a green waistcoat with florets of canary-yellow and rose. It was like an English Sunday preparation for church, with a smell of camphor

and lavender and a rustling of skirts, an air of suppressed excitement, a never-ending hunt for things in chests and drawers and a feeling that someone would never be ready. The dresses of the women were long and old-fashioned and they looked a little as if they had stepped out of a German engraving of the last century. Upstairs Richardson washed himself and the young girl cleaned his shoes and brought them up to him. When he came down into the kitchen again the womenfolk all smiled and half-bowed to him, with a sort of obsequious delight, obviously because he was young and English and Karl's friend. Just before they were ready to start for the inn he went and stood on the steps of the house and looked at the courtyard in the half-darkness. The air was quiet and warm. There was an odour of cows and straw, the scent of what he thought were some evening primroses and the smell of the summer night itself. He felt a curious sense of peace and silence come over him and all the hurry and weariness of the journey behind him seemed to slip away.

The inn was down in the centre of the village. The whole household trooped down. The green shutters were bolted over the windows, making little ladders of yellow light in the darkness. Karl and Richardson came down the street with a string of peasants trailing behind, and another group of peasants had gathered outside the inn to wait for them. People came up and shook hands with Karl and laughed and asked if he remembered them. The entrance to the inn was

through a little courtyard, where there were wooden tables set out under an old mulberry tree, making a tiny beer-garden. As Richardson went under the mulberry tree and up the steps to the inn he felt himself treading the fallen mulberries under his feet.

A long passage led down to the main room of the inn. The room was filled with extra chairs and tables for the guests. There was a smell of wine and lager and tobacco smoke and the room was brilliantly lighted.

Maria and Elsa were walking first. They were passing into the lighted room when Elsa uttered a piercing shriek and began scolding someone in a rapid patois. Everyone stopped. Richardson looked over Karl's shoulder and someone began laughing. A little brown monkey dressed in a scarlet waistcoat and a yellow bonnet sat perched on the open door. Its neck was collared and the thin chain hanging from the collar scratched against the door as the monkey quivered and waved its hands at Elsa. Suddenly the monkey began dancing and darting forward at Elsa's head. Four or five voices shouted at once:

'Jakob!'

Everyone burst out laughing and a very excited falsetto voice giggled from behind the door. The monkey vanished and suddenly an enormous fat face peeped round the door, very jovial and beaming and excited, and after it the gigantic figure of a man. He was holding up the dried skin of the monkey on his fingers; he worked his fingers and made the monkey

dance and wave its hands. He stood in the doorway like a caricature of a man, enormous, droll, powerful, giggling with excitement like a girl. His face was glorious and round and his head went back with the shape and surface of an egg, absolutely bald and shining. His left eye was missing but the right had a wonderful blue vitality. He was wearing a kind of Norfolk jacket which would not meet across his chest and a pair of pale coffee-coloured trousers of some thin material which stretched like a tight bladder over the curve of his belly.

He towered above the guests like some huge clown. He waved the monkey and rattled the chain and giggled and joked and panted. When Karl arrived he seized his hand and half-embraced him and tried to kiss him. Karl introduced Richardson and then said:

‘This is the innkeeper himself. Herr Jakob Müller.’

Richardson shook hands and the honour of meeting a young Englishman seemed to overwhelm the innkeeper. He half-bowed and smiled a shy, beatific, almost frightened smile. And then he spoke volubly to Karl and Karl translated:

‘He says perhaps you would like to see your room. He will take you up.’

Richardson said he would like to see the room and he followed the innkeeper upstairs. Above the first landing another set of stairs went up and beyond was his room, among the rafters. The innkeeper switched on the electric light and Richardson had an impression

of a clean white room, a big German bed draped in dark crimson and above the bed a picture of Christ wearing the crown of thorns. There was a smell of clean linen and old, dark wood that filled him with pleasure.

He answered all the innkeeper's questions with 'Ja, ja!' and followed him downstairs again. As they were coming down the last flight of stairs Richardson looked over Müller's shoulder and saw someone standing at the foot, as though waiting to come up. It was a young girl of twenty-one or two. She was fair-skinned and slender and her hair was as pale as ripened wheat-straw and her eyes were vividly blue and candid and shining. She carried herself in a straight, alert fashion, but she looked ready to bound away up the stairs and vanish out of sheer timidity. She was dressed in a cream-coloured dress and white stockings, with a girdle of pale blue silk about her waist.

Richardson regarded her steadily and she returned his look at first furtively but a second later with a flash of something quite bold and almost wild, as though she were trying desperately to conquer her shyness. He reached the foot of the stairs and the innkeeper turned to him and made a long excited speech, patting the girl's shoulder. Richardson stood looking at her with timid solemnity, until at last she shook his outstretched hand and hurried upstairs.

As he went back with Herr Müller into the room where the guests had gathered it suddenly came to

him that she was the girl who had hurried across the courtyard with his bag. He had caught only one word of all her father had said. It was her name: Anna. He went along the passage and into the brilliantly lighted room and joined Karl and the family. He was introduced to Frau Müller and another daughter, whose name he did not catch, a girl of twenty-nine or thirty. The woman and the girl were very blonde and a little frowzy. There was a priest there also, rather muscular and heavy-faced, his dark hair cropped very close, the colour of his grey eyes faded and dissipated. There was a great deal of handshaking. The priest kept looking at Frau Müller from the corners of his eyes. He drank a glass of hock with Karl and Richardson and then shook hands again and bowed himself away.

Herr Müller began to run in and out with bottles of wine and glasses of lager, panting and giggling with delight. He saw with consternation that Richardson was still standing. He humbled himself at once and escorted Richardson to a seat by the piano and brought him a glass of hock. It was all very charming and courteous. The piano was a sacred thing. The walnut was beautifully polished and the lid was locked and it was evidently an honour to sit there. Everyone stared at Richardson until he felt odd and isolated. As soon as he had drunk half of the hock Herr Müller ran forward with the bottle and filled up his glass. Everyone stood up and drank a toast to something. He did not understand until afterwards that the toast was for him-

self. The wine made him feel strange and elated and happy. A peasant came in with an accordion, a fair-haired, elegant young man in a suit of large brown checks and squeaky, tea-coloured shoes. He shook hands with excessive politeness and unrolled a great deal of music. The party seemed to grow suddenly vivacious, everyone laughing and chatting and drinking, the air thick with the smoke of cigars and the smell of wine, the young peasant playing a tune on the accordion and all the guests stamping their feet and singing to the tune.

The peasant had finished playing and Richardson was drinking a glass of cherry-brandy when he saw over the edge of his glass the figure of Anna. She had come into the room with her father and they were coming towards the piano. Beside the immense droll figure of Müller she looked extremely delicate and more than ever shy and naive and slender. She was carrying some music in her hands. Her father, like a man performing a religious ceremony, unlocked the piano and dusted the yellow keys and the pale rose fabric behind the fretted woodwork.

When he had finished dusting he turned to Richardson and made a long speech, evidently about the girl. Richardson listened, bewildered, until Karl came up.

‘What does he say?’ asked Richardson.

‘He is telling you all about the girl. She went to school in Kreuznach and now she goes down there once a week to take music lessons.’

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'Tell him he may well be proud of her.'

Karl spoke to Müller and Müller said something and Karl translated.

'He is very honoured. He wants to know if you can sing.'

'I can't sing. But tell him I am very honoured, too.'

Karl spoke to Müller again and while he was speaking Richardson looked at the girl. She was standing with her hip against the piano and she returned his look with a quick, embarrassed flash of her eyes and then lowered her lids quickly again. He thought she had about her in that moment, with her downcast eyes and the electric light very gold on her fine thick hair, a loveliness that was inexplicably impressive and thrilling. He had an extraordinary feeling also that she was not a stranger to him, like the peasants, and that it was not strange for him to stand and gaze at her while she found some music and arranged it on the piano and sat down to play.

He sat down at last also and she began to play. He saw at once that she did not play brilliantly, but rather methodically and timidly, and he felt quite relieved. Her fingers were very long and delicate and she struck the keys very softly and the piano sounded thin and reedy. She played something that Richardson did not know, a simple, rather formal air with variations, which he thought might have been written about springtime by a ghost of Schumann. The peasants were quiet, with a kind of reverence, as though it were a great

honour to listen to Anna Müller, who had been well-educated and went every week to take music lessons in Kreuznach. When she had finished they applauded and smiled on her with the same sort of deference, plainly looking up to her as someone above them. She half-turned on the piano stool and smiled and Richardson gazed straight into her face and without thinking what he was doing shouted:

‘Bravo! Bravo!’

He let the pleasure she had given him come unmistakably into his voice. He felt that he wanted to impress her and he smiled too. She flashed him a single look half of fear, half of delight, and at once lowered her head over the piano and her music again.

After that she played several other pieces and the peasants sang. Müller kept bringing Richardson cherry brandies, which he drank straight off, and he began to feel strange and dreamy.

A little later Herr Müller came running in and spoke to Karl in great excitement. Karl translated for Richardson:

‘The village choir are outside and they want to sing for us. He says they are very good singers and we ought to treat them.’

‘Tell him we’re very honoured.’

Karl spoke with Müller.

‘He says everyone will be very amused if we have the beer brought in one big glass.’

Richardson thought it would be amusing, too, and

Karl told Müller, who ran out of the room and came back a moment later, leading the choir. There were ten or twelve brown, fair, smiling young peasants, who looked like a group of English country labourers. They grinned and made a line at the end of the room and were ready to sing when Herr Müller rushed in with an enormous boot-shaped glass running over with pale-gold beer. All the singers laughed and took long drinks and were very boisterous. Karl and Richardson drank also. Karl took a mighty drink that left the peasants gasping and at last applauding with delight. Finally the singers were ready. They began to sing, very low and in unison, a kind of ballad with a long string of verses. They sang magnificently, their voices soft and rich and humorous, the song itself something like a mountain stream, bright and gentle at first and then faster and stronger and finally deep and gorgeous and abandoned, like a torrent plunging splendidly down to a deep ravine. They ended the song on a shout and the guests laughed and applauded, and Müller ran hastily in with another boot of beer.

A little later Müller was pouring Richardson another cherry brandy. He was called suddenly away and forgot the bottle. Richardson seized another glass and filled it and then leaned over and held out the glass to Anna.

She had been looking at some music. She raised her head and looked at him with a startled expression, and then very slowly stretched out her hand and took

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the glass from him. He looked straight into her face with an expression of unmistakable delight. She looked irresistible and he wanted suddenly to reach out and touch her. He sat there for a moment in a sort of faintness, overcome by his own delight and the sensation of being so near to her. She lifted up her glass and took a sip of the brandy. He watched her without a flicker of his eyes.

Suddenly someone switched out the electric light and put the room in darkness. For a moment or two he was conscious of nothing but blackness and of people laughing and groping about the room. But a second later he was aware also of something soft and warm moving very close to him and lastly of someone kissing him. The lips were warm and sensitive and the kiss itself was tremulous and eager, with a brief, unmistakable hint of tenderness. He had not time to move his hands and a second or two later the lights were on again and the lips had been drawn away.

He came to himself like a man in another world. He felt queer and intoxicated in a way that was different from the intoxication brought about by the wine. He looked straight at Anna. She was sitting half-turned to him and he thought her eyes were fixed as with a kind of tremulous, almost painful admiration.

He did not know what to do. He felt dazzled and his hands were trembling, and he felt his heart beating in a foolish, unaccountable way. He felt almost glad that he could not speak to her or make any other sign

than a long, intent look at her. And they sat absolutely motionless, gazing at each other softly and steadfastly, like two people playing a strange game of endurance with each other. A long time seemed to pass. He was vaguely conscious of the choir singing again and drinking another boot of beer and finally bowing themselves through the doorway.

At last, very suddenly, the girl got up and walked out of the room. He sat back and very slowly finished his brandy and thought in astonishment of the darkness, the soft movement of Anna's arms and lastly the kiss itself.

He finished another brandy and another hock. The elegant young man played the accordion again and five or six peasants danced across the floor. The rhythmical, swirling figures made him feel sleepier than ever. The girl did not come back. He recalled over and over again the moment of the kiss with her.

Finally the party began to break up. He shook hands with everyone, and Karl, who was a little drunk, promised to call at the inn for him in the morning.

'We'll go up into the forest,' he said. 'Like to see the forest, wouldn't you? The forest is lovely — lovely! My God, it's lovely!'

As the guests were trooping out Müller sprang from behind a door and terrified the women with the monkey again. There was a great deal of shrieking and shouting and laughter as the party trailed away up the dark street.

Richardson went back into the inn. Herr Müller and his wife shook hands with him and smiled on him with great broad smiles. He did not see Anna. He lingered about in the guest-room, pretending to look for something, but she did not come, and finally he went slowly upstairs and into his room and shut the door.

I V

He awoke between seven and eight o'clock and got out of bed and went to the window. He knew at once from the look of the sky, very soft, cloudless and tranquil, that the day would be hot again. The sun was already brilliant on the painted white walls of the inn and the flags of the courtyard beyond the shade of the mulberry tree. The shadows of the tall houses zig-zagged across the street and up the white walls of the houses opposite with dark, sharp angles, as though cut out with scissors. He leaned out of the window and saw on the flags the red smears of the mulberries that the guests had crushed under their feet the night before. He remembered Anna. The courtyard and the street were deserted, but voices were talking downstairs and there was a fragrance of fresh bread and coffee.

He went downstairs and Frau Müller gave him his coffee in a little room adorned with yellowing family portraits and big oleographs of battle-scenes and bright coloured paintings on glass. While he was drinking

his coffee Herr Müller came in and smiled on him and shook hands. He looked more jovial and droll and pot-bellied than ever.

He finished his breakfast and went out into the courtyard. There was no sign of Anna. He lingered about in the sunshine, hoping she would come out, but she did not come. Once or twice he thought he could hear her voice but he was never sure and at last he walked slowly away up the street to look for Karl. He met no one but a few children and an old peasant woman and a youth with a reaping-machine drawn by an old bony red cow. They all said 'Guten morgen' and the youth raised his hat to him.

He recognized the house with the grape-vine and went into the courtyard and up the steps to the kitchen door. The young girl and Maria were in the kitchen, scraping a big earthenware bowl of potatoes. Maria got up at once and wiped her hands on her skirt and smiled. He smiled at her in return and said in a questioning tone:

'Karl?'

She nodded and ran at once to the stairs and shouted 'Karl! Karl!' but there was no answer, and finally she beckoned him and led him upstairs and showed him into a bedroom.

Karl was lying in a huge wooden bed. His dark head was just visible. The pillows had fallen to the floor and the great covering bolster was lying askew and crumpled and the rest of the bedclothes were

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tangled about his body. He looked as though he had spent the night struggling and wrestling with something. When Richardson bent down and shook his shoulder he groaned and buried his face in the sheets and told him to go away.

'What about the forest?' said Richardson.

'God, what about it?'

'What's the matter with you? You didn't drink very much at the inn.'

'We had another party here afterwards.'

'You look like ten parties.'

His hair was tangled and matted over his forehead and his eyes looked swollen and unhappy. 'How far is the forest? I'll go myself.'

'Two miles.'

'I'll go and be back for you soon. Is that all right?'

'God, I don't care what you do.'

He groaned again and struggled with the sheets and turned away.

Richardson went downstairs and through the courtyard and down the street again. The crimson mattresses hanging out of the bedroom windows looked brilliant in the sunshine. The sky was wonderfully blue and cloudless and the sun itself was hot and dazzling on his face.

When he reached the inn again a door in the wall of the courtyard was standing open and beyond he could see an orchard and a patch of flower-garden. He thought he could hear voices also and out of curiosity he walked in. The orchard was very small and the

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trees were old and strangely shaped and stooping. In the flower-garden nothing but a few ragged crimson dahlias were growing and a scarlet salvia or two, very handsome and brilliant by the wall in the sunshine. The dahlias had been staked and tied and the stakes were hooded with flower-pots for earwigs. He touched the heavy heads of the dahlias as he passed along the path into the orchard itself. The grass under the trees, very long and thick, was scattered with fallen plums and pears. The air was full of a smell of the dank grass and a heavy scent, like wine, of the fruit that lay rotting everywhere in the bright sunshine.

As he went forward under the trees he heard voices again, and coming suddenly to an open space he found Anna and her sister gathering the fruit of a giant pear tree. They were standing on a ladder, the elder girl just under the lowest branches and Anna at the ladder head, only her blue-striped skirt and stockings visible among the leaves.

He stood still and watched them. He had come up quite noiselessly and for a minute or two they chattered to each other among the branches without knowing he was there. But suddenly he moved and the elder girl turned and saw him and uttered a little cry.

A moment later she was climbing hastily down the ladder. He gave her one quick smile and then looked up at Anna. She was climbing down also, step by step, very slowly, with her back against the ladder, the basket of pears half-resting against her knees. She

had to come down a step or two before the leaves had swung clear of her face and the first sight of Richardson at the foot of the ladder was so sudden that she stopped involuntarily and stared at him in shy astonishment before breaking into a little smile. He smiled also. Against the curtain of dark shining pear-leaves she looked pale, fair and curiously far away. He thought she looked very happy and entrancing too. He felt a strange sensation of pleasure surge up in him at the mere sight of her, a faint, delicious feeling of the most perfect joy.

A moment later he remembered something. He wanted to take her photograph. He would take her standing on the ladder, among the pear-leaves, with the basket held just below her breast. He turned at once and called involuntarily, 'Wait a moment', and hurried out of the orchard into the house.

When he returned with the camera they were trying to move the ladder. They wanted it to reach the branches where the pears were growing thickest, in the crown of the tree. He helped them move the ladder and made it firm against a branch, and when Anna took the basket and climbed up he picked up the camera and focused her. The elder girl uttered a little shriek of delight. Anna turned and saw the camera facing her. She blushed furiously, and he motioned her to come down a little and she turned and sat on a rung of the ladder, smoothing her hands quickly across her breast and skirt and hair until he was ready.

He took a long time over the photograph. It gave him the greatest pleasure to see the clear, pale image of her in the camera and then to look up at her, sitting like an image also, watching him with an attentive half-smile, like someone listening to something very lovely and illuminating.

He remained for a long time in the orchard with them. He took photographs of them sitting together on the ladder and another of Anna alone, half-lying in the grass among the fallen pears. After the photographs he climbed up into the highest branches of the tree, where the girls were a little afraid of venturing, and helped them to gather the pears. He liked the sensation of being far up in the tree, moving precariously from branch to branch in the sunlight, swaying the branches so that the pears swung back into his hands. He liked the stillness of the garden also, the scent of the ripe fruit, the voices of the girls breaking up the stillness, the face of Anna looking furtively up at him through the lacework of leaves.

Somewhere about eleven o'clock Herr Müller himself came into the orchard and called them into the courtyard for a glass of wine. In the courtyard was a young peasant who had come in to see Richardson. He had been a prisoner in England and could speak a little English and it would be a great honour to meet an Englishman again.

The wine was red and very cold and sharp. They drank it sitting at the tables or lounging in the shade of

the mulberry tree. The young peasant was very shy and began protesting:

'I cannot the English no more speak — not now.'

'But that's very good,' said Richardson.

'I forget.'

'But it will come back.'

'For ten years I do not say.'

'But you remember it perfectly.'

'Ja?' He was delighted. 'You think?'

Gradually he lost his shyness and they talked of England, and Richardson asked him to have some beer. 'Ein bier, Herr Müller,' he called and everyone laughed.

They talked English over the beer and the wine while the Müllers stood listening. The peasant had come straight from the fields. He and his mother were harvesting their wheat; he had mown enough for her to rake and band, but she was very quick and he must soon go back to her. Richardson said that he would like to go into the fields that afternoon to see him mowing and to take photographs of him and his mother among the sheaves.

The peasant was overjoyed and began trying to explain the way Richardson must take in order to reach his land. He tried to explain in English but failed, and blushing and laughing at himself, he finally appealed to Anna. They talked together for a moment or two, and Anna nodded her head and Richardson felt his heart begin to beat excitedly even before the peasant said to him:

‘Anna will come with you.’

He saw her look at him as soon as the words had been spoken. It was the same tremulous, almost frightened look he had seen on her face once or twice the night before.

Finally they went back into the orchard. The dahlias were beginning to droop their heads in the heat of the day and the sun was fiercely hot on his head up in the branches of the tree. This time Anna did not come up into the tree. She walked about in the grass and filled her basket with fallen pears and hardly looked up into the branches.

Whenever he looked forward to the afternoon and when finally the afternoon came and he was waiting about in the courtyard for Anna to appear, he experienced a wonderful, inarticulate happiness.

It was still early when Anna came. She had changed her dress, as though it were something extremely important to escort him into the fields, and she was wearing a silky, cream-coloured frock which looked spotlessly preserved, as though she only wore it on great occasions.

They smiled at each other and in silence went off through the village and soon they were in the country beyond. The road wound on through patches of wheat and rye and sometimes there were vineyards and strips of maize and tobacco, the leaves of the maize drooping and glossy in the hot sun. A little distance away the forest stood, the pines like a black, silent, gloomy

barricade against the sky. On the roadside the wild yellow snapdragon was growing again, with poppies and purple knapweed and solitary blossoms of chicory. The peasants were beginning to work again after the midday rest, the men mowing, the women tying and shocking the sheaves. They paused and lifted their hands and stared as Anna and Richardson passed along the road.

The young peasant and his mother were working a patch of red-eared wheat not far from the edge of the forest. The woman had a thin, dark-brown face with fine, deep-sunken peasant's eyes, very shrewd and quick and watchful, but with the wonderful shining tranquillity of the sunlight in them too. Her face seemed to burn with an inexhaustible life under her white kerchief. She seemed both curiously proud and shy and was overcome with shame at the idea of being photographed in her black working skirt, with her sleeves rolled up and a sheaf in her arms. Finally she consented to stand with Anna, without the sheaf, against the corn that was still uncut. She looked very dark and awkward and embarrassed. Anna by contrast seemed to Richardson filled with a lovely composure and light.

Afterwards he photographed the peasant and his mother and then Anna with them. At every click of the camera they laughed with relief and delight. Richardson, laughing too, promised to send them the photographs when he returned to England.

Finally as he was folding up his camera he said to the peasant:

'Is that where the forest begins — over there?'

'The forest — yes.'

'I should like to see it. You understand? I have never been in the forest.'

'No?'

'No. You will ask Anna if she will take me? I should like to see the forest once.'

The peasant spoke with Anna, and Anna nodded her head, looking at Richardson quickly and softly, but without a trace of apprehension or timidity.

Richardson shook hands with the peasant and his mother and then followed Anna along the path to the road again. A little later they struck away from the road and took the path to the forest.

Eventually they came upon the forest path itself and walked a little distance under the trees and stood still. There was a strange deathly stillness and silence everywhere, and overhead the pines made a thick dark screen which shut out the sunlight. The earth was strewn with pine-needles, faintly scented and soundless to walk upon, making a brown floor that went on infinitely, without a trace of green, into the gloomy distance of slumbering trees. Overawed by the silence, the grandeur and the primeval force of it, Richardson stood in a solemn contemplation of it until he became aware of Anna moving on again.

He did not follow her until she was some distance

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ahead of him. He walked behind her at last very slowly, listening to the forest and watching her at the same time. Sometimes the sunlight filtered down through a break in the pines and she walked through the shaft of it, the flash of her light hair very rich and lovely. Walking behind her he noticed consciously for the first time how she did her hair; it was plaited into one thick coil and twisted about the back of her head in the shape of a figure eight.

She walked on ahead until they came to an opening in the pines. The sunlight suddenly poured down upon them again, burning through the light leaves of some overhanging birches. The silver trunks of the birches gleamed like satin in the sunshine and the earth was covered with a short soft grass and the leaves of wild strawberries.

As they came to the birch-tree she stopped and turned and waited for him. He stopped also. She looked up at the sunlight and the birches and then at Richardson and then back to the trees again. He slipped his arm very lightly across her shoulder. He felt her body trembling and saw her breast rising and falling quickly with emotion. He looked at her uplifted face steadfastly and quietly. She seemed irresistibly lovely, her eyes marvellously blue and candid and soft, and suddenly he stooped and kissed her lightly, but with profound tenderness. The soft caressing line of her lips was familiar immediately. She uttered a little sound of pleasure, half-sighing, half-laughing, and he

felt a sensation of intolerable happiness at the sound of her voice expressing her joy.

Afterwards he kissed her again and they went on through the forest. Sometimes she stopped him and clasped him by the shoulders and began speaking slowly and hesitantly in German. There was something she longed to tell him and could not express in gestures and glances. Finally she would shake her head and laugh and give it up and let him kiss her again.

‘Anna, Anna,’ he would say to her softly.

They turned and came slowly back along the forest-path. He did not want to speak to her. He was overjoyed simply by the thrilling nearness of her body, the touch of her breasts against him through her soft dress, the marvellously radiant expression on her face and the sensation of sweet, tormenting happiness in his heart.

Finally they came out of the forest and walked down the hot road to Iben again. As they approached the village they saw someone hurrying up the road to meet them. It was Karl. Richardson involuntarily waved his hand and Karl waved back in reply.

A moment later Richardson turned his head and discovered Anna looking at him dumbly, with a kind of timid anxiety. It was only then that he remembered they were leaving Iben in the morning and were going on to Berlin.

They were ready to depart at noon on the following day. Richardson had packed his bag and carried it up to the farm and Karl's brothers had loaded it into a low spring cart in readiness to drive to the station. There was a station two miles away and a train left there at three o'clock. Richardson and Karl had spent the morning saying farewell to everyone who remembered Karl as a child. Everyone smiled a great deal and was very charming to them and they drank wine at every house. Over the wine the peasants would ask them about England and about the war. The talk was always the same. No one had wanted a war and why had it happened? After war they would talk of money. A peasant would talk of the days when he had taken a wagon-load of plums to market and had brought back a wagon-load of marks and how the next day the marks had become worthless. Sometimes the old people would unlock a drawer and give Richardson a note for ten million marks and ask him to keep it in memory of them. They would let him see the drawer stuffed full of money and then shrug their shoulders as if to say, 'Of course it isn't worth a pfennig. We just keep it out of curiosity,' but he felt that he sometimes detected a look in their faces as though they secretly believed that everything would be changed, and that one day they would be suddenly wealthy.

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Afterwards there was a big farewell lunch at the farm, with great helpings of heavy food and bottles of hock. Richardson felt sick of wine and tried to keep up the level of his glass by pretending to drink. The day was very hot again and the food seemed sickening too.

From his place at the table he could see across the courtyard and he remembered how he had first seen Anna hurrying across there with his bag. He had not seen Anna all day, and during the morning he had wondered where she was and if he would see her again. He had not seen her since the night before, when he had returned late to the inn and had been startled by the sound of her hurrying across the courtyard. She had rested her hands on his shoulders and had whispered to him very earnestly. From the tone of her voice he had known it was something important but he had not understood a word.

After the lunch was over they were to go down to the inn and say farewell to the Müllers. Richardson felt that he would like to take photographs of them standing under the mulberry tree.

At the inn Herr Müller greeted them with shouts and giggles of joy. Frau Müller and the elder sister came out, straightening their skirts and smoothing their hair. There was no sign of Anna. Richardson unfolded his camera, wondering desperately if she would come. At the sight of the camera the two women fled to change their dresses and came out again wearing frowzy white Sunday frocks with high collars.

Herr Müller fetched his monkey and stood with the two women under the mulberry tree. Anna did not come. Richardson felt a kind of sickening desperation in his heart and finally he could bear it no longer and said to Karl:

‘Why isn’t Anna here?’

He heard Karl speak to Müller. He bent his head over the camera and waited for the reply and presently he heard Karl say:

‘It is the day for her music lesson in Kreuznach.’

He felt suddenly sick, overcome by despair. He lowered his head and focused the camera on the Müllers. The sunlight was shining full on their faces and he knew the photograph would be very poor, but he did not care. He simply held up his hand and the camera clicked and it was all over.

‘Auf Wiedersehen, Auf Wiedersehen!’ said the Müllers. ‘Auf Wiedersehen!’

‘Good-bye,’ said Karl.

‘Goot-bye!’

Back at the farm everyone was ready and the carts were waiting. Maria had packed up sandwiches of rye bread and sausage, enough for the whole journey to Berlin. Elsa was weeping and Karl’s mother was trying not to weep. They all crowded into the carts and drove away out of the village and along the hot white road to the station and the peasants ran out of the houses to wave at them as they passed.

There was an oppressive stillness about the heat of

the afternoon and a tremulous dark haze over the distant patches of wheat and rye. Richardson looked at everything, the peasants working among the corn, the chicory-flowers in the parched grass, the burning sky and the dark edge of the forest, with a memory of Anna. The sickening sensation in his heart had been replaced by a soft, intolerable ache, half sweet and half unhappy.

The train was waiting in the station, hissing quietly. Karl and Richardson found a carriage and Karl's relatives crowded about the doorway, talking and weeping and shaking hands. At the last moment Karl's father handed Richardson a bottle of hock and made a little speech, which Karl translated.

'They have been very honoured to meet you. The wine is very old and good and they would like you to have it and not forget them.'

'Thank them very much,' Richardson said. 'I shan't forget.'

A moment or two later the train began to move. Everyone waved hands and shouted farewell, and Karl and Richardson leaned out of the window and waved too. The platform receded quickly and finally the station and the waving figures vanished from sight.

Richardson sat down in the corner of the carriage without a word. The train began to pass through the forest and the sunlight came flickering into the windows between the dark shadows of the pines. Sometimes there were stretches of birch trees and the sunlight was

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dappled and quivering as it fell on the glass. In the forest itself there was no sunlight, but only the still, sombre gloom through which he had walked with Anna the previous day. He remembered Anna perfectly as he looked at it, her shy tremulous face, her sensitive lips, the irresistibly lovely look of joy which she had sometimes given at him. She seemed more than ever lovely in recollection and because he would never see her again.

The train gathered speed and the forest flashed past in a dark, bewildering panorama. Richardson tried to give up thinking of Anna but she remained with him persistently, like the forest running side by side with the train. Sometimes on the edge of the forest he saw patches of pink flowers like willow-herb and tall drooping flowers like evening primroses. Once he caught sight of a deer running away at the sound of the train. He thought of Anna for a long time. He had never even spoken with her and sometimes it seemed as if he had hardly known her. She had appeared briefly and wonderfully and had vanished, like the rainbow. He knew he would never see her again and he wondered if he would remember her.

There was a break in the forest and the train stopped at a station, and then the train and the forest ran on together again.

He wondered also if she would remember him.

FOR THE DEAD

A LITTLE pink-faced man, wearing a bowler hat and a mackintosh over a black suit, was hurrying towards the cemetery carrying a bunch of white chrysanthemums wrapped in newspaper and smoking a stump of cigarette that was half hidden by his greyish yellow moustache. A gentle rain was falling, a drizzling misty November rain that clung like dew to the chrysanthemums and like tiniest beads of quicksilver to the man's moustache and his bowler hat. The afternoon would be dark early. The sky was a single vast leaden cloud; the rain was coming a little faster each moment. As the rain came faster the man increased his pace. He carried the chrysanthemums close to his side, furtively, flowers downward, uneasily conscious of them.

The cemetery was deserted. In the distance the rain made a faint vapour, dissolving the white tombstones. The cypress trees drooped heavily and the branches of the leafless almond trees stood black against the sky, delicately laced with odd jewels of rain.

Hurrying, the man went past the public water-tap and the watering-cans and along the wet devious paths among the graves. He walked as though it were all very distasteful to him — the rain, the deserted cemetery, the very thought of placing the flowers on the grave of

his dead wife. Yet there was a kind of indifference also in his very irritation, as though he hardly cared whether the flowers were put there or not. He began to walk even faster, anxious to have done with it all.

He came at last to his wife's grave, a rectangle of white marble enclosing a mound of neglected grass, and without taking off his hat and still sucking the cigarette through his wet moustache he took the chrysanthemums from their wrapping of newspaper, shook them and dropped them carelessly on the wet grass. On the grass, in a half-rusty green tin vase, stood the chrysanthemums he had put there a fortnight before. Once white, they were now shrivelled and blackened by frost and rain. Straddling the grave he seized the tin, wrenched out the old flowers and dropped them too on the wet grass.

Picking up the new chrysanthemums he hesitated. The tin was empty of water. He stood for a moment wondering if he should walk back across the cemetery to the water-tap. And then, impatiently, he decided against it. It was a long way in the rain. What did it matter? A lot of trouble, a lot of trouble for nothing. The flowers would die in any case. He wanted to get it over.

He hastily picked up the new white bunch of chrysanthemums. But stooping with them he again hesitated.

Down the path, also at a grave, was another man. He was a thin stooping figure and with his black

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bowler hat and his black overcoat he had the almost ascetic respectability of a tired shopwalker. Like the small man he was middle-aged, and like him also he was arranging a bunch of white chrysanthemums hastily, as though it were distasteful and he wanted to escape from the cemetery and the rain.

They noticed each other simultaneously and could not avoid speaking.

'Good afternoon.'

'Ah, good afternoon.'

They were slightly acquainted and they spoke deferentially, their voices a little embarrassed, and they stood for a moment hesitant, not knowing what to do or what also to say.

Then casually the smaller man glanced up at the sky. 'I shouldn't wonder if it rained all night,' he remarked.

Then, as he lowered his eyes, he saw that the other man had removed his hat and was staring dismally at the rain, as though in thought.

'Ah!' he said heavily. 'I shouldn't wonder.' The small man glanced at the other man with secret annoyance for having removed his hat.

There was a silence, then, after a moment, the small man unobtrusively took off his hat also. His head, very bald, like a bladder of pink lard, seemed to stand out strangely large in the colourless rainy air. Then, as he stood with his head half-bowed, the little man remembered his cigarette. It seemed suddenly dis-

respectful and he let it fall from his mouth and it dropped on the wet grass, hissing faintly until he put his foot on it.

They stood there with their hats in their hands and with the rain drizzling on their bare heads until the tall man spoke again.

'You haven't a drop of water to spare,' he said, 'have you?'

The little man shook his head. 'But I was just going to the tap,' he said. 'I'll bring a can.'

'Oh no, I was going myself.'

'It seems a pity for us both to go.'

The tall man smiled and shook his head with a heavy and deliberate pretence of mournfulness.

'One day we shall have to go,' he said.

The little man nodded. 'I suppose so,' he said, heavily also.

Almost before they were aware of it they were walking down the path together, leaving their flowers on the wet grass. They walked at a slow almost solemn pace, with their hats still in their hands, as though to a funeral. Now and then they shot furtive glances of secret impatience at each other, each irritably wondering when the other would put on his hat. But neither made a sign, and they walked to the water-tap and back to the graves again without a change of pace, each with a can of water in one hand and his hat still in the other.

Stooping over the graves they arranged their flowers with a kind of deliberate reverence, filling the tin

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vases carefully, touching the flower petals with a perceptible show of tenderness. At intervals they half glanced up at each other, each as though wondering if the other were looking and what he were thinking.

At last they were finished and they stood upright. The thin man had been kneeling and he brushed his hands across his wet knees. The little man could feel the rain falling in larger drops on his bald head and collecting into even larger drops that rolled suddenly, like little balls of ice, down his neck.

They stood in silence, a pace or two back from the graves, their heads a trifle bowed in a pretence of grief. They stood there for what seemed to both of them a long time, secretly impatient, staring heavily into space, as though reflecting regretfully on the past and the dead. They had no longer any need to pretend wretchedness. The rain was coming down each moment faster and colder, dripping swiftly down from the wintry branches to the glistening marble tombs and the yellowish muddy paths. Once or twice the tall man ran his hand in concern across his damp knees and the other shook his head slightly, shivering miserably under the cold rain.

At last the tall man gave a sigh as though reluctant to depart, and picked up his watering-can.

'Well, it's no use standing here,' he said mournfully. He shook his head as he spoke. 'No use standing here.'

The little man shook his head in melancholy agreement, sighing also.

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A moment later, with secret relief, they were walking away together down the path. Unobtrusively the tall man put on his hat and then the small man put on his too. They walked deferentially, in silence, until they reached the water-tap, where they left their watering-cans.

At the gates they stood for a moment and then parted. The rain was falling heavily, the mist and the darkness together hid the farthest tombs and trees from sight, and the two men hurried away from each other with angry relief and impatience, as though they never wished to see each other again.

THE WEDDING

I WAS seven or eight and my great-uncle Silas nearly seventy when his only son Abel was married to a girl named Georgina, and we all drove over for the wedding in the black-and-yellow trap with the white racy-looking horse, my grandparents and parents, my aunt and I, before the dew had dried on the buttercupped grass one May morning. The air was rich and summery and the sun was a long time breaking through the mist as we drove along. The wedding had come upon us suddenly. The girl, Georgina, had arrived that springtime to be a lady's maid at the house where Abel had been a gardener for nearly twenty years. It was all over in a month; done, as my grandfather said, all of a damn pop. Nor did my grandmother like it; she was a little, pale woman, like a faded canary and as quick-tongued, and as she sat perched up on the high trap seat in her grey and purple silk I thought she looked as if she would like to peck at the creature who had seduced a solid, hard-hatted fellow like Abel with such indecent haste. Abel was nearly forty and the girl, it seemed, was only nineteen. But it was to be a great wedding.

We talked of it as we drove along. 'I should think,' said my grandmother, 'he's well set to work, marrying a filly like that. Nineteen!' But my grandfather had seen the girl.

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'Dall it all,' he kept saying, 'she's flash. And don't she talk nice! Jest so. Ho dear, ho dear! I tell you she's lovely.'

'Yes, and without a farden to bless herself with, I'll be bound. Who's paying for the flash wedding?'

'Silas, I expect.'

'Ah,' said my grandmother, 'and I'd Silas him if I were Sarah Ann. I remember the last wedding we went to with Silas.'

My grandfather evidently remembered it too. He suddenly looked embarrassed, nudged my arm, and pointed with his driving whip at a cuckoo flying fast across a field of beans, calling as it flew, its voice trembling with the motion of its flight. My grandfather followed the bird until it alighted, far off, in an ash tree, and then he nudged me again and told me to look up, straight above, at a lark breaking into passionate song, and we turned our faces to the sun-misty sky and watched the bird twittering up and up, out of sight.

'You'll get something you don't expect,' my grandmother warned us, 'cocking your eyes at that bird.'

'Tchk! Tchk!' said my grandfather to the horse.

'And *look* at you!' exclaimed my grandmother, suddenly. 'Whoa! I never saw such a man in all my born days. You'll be hanging yourself in the reins next.'

'Whoa!' said my grandfather gloomily.

The horse stopped and my grandmother leaned

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across me and seized my grandfather's collar, which had sprung away from its stud, catapulting his necktie away and releasing his white starched dicky from its top buttonhole.

'Hold still,' urged my grandmother. 'That comes of gaping at birds instead of driving on as you should do.' She fixed the collar, smoothed the tie and flattened the dicky, and my grandfather, looking extremely meek and ill at ease in the iron-starched collar and front and his best black clothes and hard hat, drove on again, straining his sun-tanned neck so that the guides tautened in agony. 'Lord, man, anybody'd think you'd been hung,' said my grandmother.

As we drove on the mist began to disperse, the sun shining through at first softly and at last with the strong thundery heat of the May morning. 'I don't know,' said my grandmother, as though in hope, 'as that girl ain't going to have a wet ride after all.'

It was five miles to my uncle Silas's house, and though the wedding wasn't until two o'clock, we had started the journey at ten o'clock in the morning. There was no sense, declared my grandmother, in not making a day of it; nor, said my grandfather, did we want to wrench the guts out of the horse. So we had started early, and we drove along all the time at the same solemn pace, the horse never breaking into a trot, my grandfather never using the whip except to flick away the flies; and now and then we would stop,

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perhaps to admire a field of young barley, or to have a word by the roadside with a man my grandfather hadn't seen for a year, or to gaze at the bluebells staining the dark earth of the woods we passed. At every hill we stopped so that my parents and my grandmother and aunt could alight and walk up the hill. My grandfather and I remained in the trap, sitting well forward in the seat in order to relieve the strain on the horse. And once, going up a hill by a spinney, we heard a nightingale, and then another and another, singing fitfully, but with breaks of wild passion, in the young hazel trees. Cuckoos were calling continually in their full bold mocking, and when we stopped to listen it sounded as though the cuckoos were contradicting the nightingales, their monotonous cries half-drowning the others wild spasmodic singing.

'We must ask your uncle Silas,' said my grandfather, 'if he knows to a nightingale's.'

'He'll have enough to think on,' said my grandmother, 'with that other nightingale.'

It was nearly twelve o'clock when we arrived at my uncle Silas's house, the little reed-thatched house standing at the top of the violet-banked lane by the spinney of pines. The lane, steep and narrow, was cobbled with white hoof-smooth stones, and at the bottom of it we all alighted, my grandfather and I leading the horse.

'Dall it,' exclaimed my grandfather as we came within sight of the house, 'can I see straight?'

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We all stopped on the crest of the slope, and my grandmother let out an exclamation of tart astonishment:

'A tent! What the 'nation do they want with a tent? Ain't that just like Silas?'

'It might be Georgina's doing,' said my aunt. 'I heard she'd got money.'

'I'd Georgina her!' cried my grandmother as we went on.

As we came nearer the house the tent which had been erected in Uncle Silas's paddock seemed larger than ever, a big square marquee with a sort of squat steeple, the canvas as white as the moon-daisies growing thicker than the grass in the field. Little yellow and green and blue and scarlet pennants fluttered above it listlessly, and its ropes were as clean as new straw. Long trestle tables had been erected both inside it and on the surrounding grass, and waiters in shirt-sleeves were already rushing hither and thither, spreading cloths even whiter than the tent, arranging flower-vases, carrying glasses and cups and plates and cutlery, salt-silvered hams and joints of beef and roast fowls and loaves and cheese, dark bottles of wine and cases of beer and stone-jars of home-made, unloading them from a wagon which had been drawn up before us by two satiny black horses with their ears in little silk nets and their tails plaited and tied with bows of white and cornflower-blue.

'It's a lick,' said my grandfather, who seemed, I

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thought, to be not so much astonished as delighted. 'Look at them bottles!'

'You look at what you're doing,' said my grandmother.

And very slowly we all walked on to the house, marvelling at the tent and the food-laden tables and the sweating waiters.

Just as we drew up behind the wagon an extraordinary figure in yellow corduroy trousers, a blue shirt, a red waistcoat and a squashed brown panama, came rushing excitedly out of the house carrying a tray of glasses and bottles with one hand and trying to keep up his trousers with the other. He was waddling on his thick bowed legs across the paddock, chuckling wickedly, when my grandmother arrested him.

'Silas!' she shouted. 'Do you want to blind us all?'

'Lord a' mighty,' said my uncle Silas, 'I never seed you.' He stopped abruptly and, still holding up his trousers, came rolling back across the paddock towards us.

I whispered to my mother, 'Why can't he walk straight?'

'Sshh!' she said. 'It's the heavy bottles.'

From the way in which my grandmother began to address my uncle Silas it seemed as if it were the heavy bottles.

'Silas,' she said, 'you ought to be ashamed of yourself at twelve o'clock in the morning.'

'I am,' he said wickedly.

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'And what's happened to your trousers?'

'They'll be down any minute.'

'Silas, you're not responsible! Where's Sarah Ann?'

'Gone down to church to titivate the altar.'

'I'll titivate you in a minute!' she threatened, and before Silas could move or speak she was off towards the house, nipping along in her inexorable, quick, bird-like fashion.

When she returned a moment or two later my uncle Silas was already totting out for the waiters and my grandfather and himself, the beer in the glasses shining a rich tawny dandelion-gold in the noon sunlight. He was standing at one end of the long trestle-tables, pouring out beer with one hand and still holding up his trousers with the other, when she arrived behind him. He had no chance with her. 'Stand still,' she said, seizing his trousers. 'It's a darning needle,' and with her lips set tartly she proceeded to sew on his lost buttons, her hands spider-quick and neat with the thread. 'I'm surprised at you, Silas,' she would say. 'And if you touch that glass I'll prick you.'

My uncle Silas stood with a sort of meek wickedness, winking at the waiters.

'And what about this girl?' said my grandmother. 'Didn't waste no time, did she?'

'Nor did you.'

'I said what about her?'

'Lovely.'

'And who's paying for all this — this tent an' all?'

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'A markwee,' my uncle Silas corrected her. 'A markwee.'

'Well, whatever it is. You ain't paying for it, I hope?'

'Lord Henry and Lady Hester,' said my uncle Silas, 'are paying for every mite and mossel.'

'Everything?'

'Every drop and crumb.'

'And the tent?'

'And the markwee.'

My grandmother had no more to say. She was finished. She put the final stitch into my uncle Silas's trousers and stuck the needle into some invisible place among her skirts. My uncle Silas drank his beer at one draught, and my grandmother seemed to be so flabbergasted that she did not see him pour out another, not only for himself, but for my grandfather too.

She stalked off into the house, and my parents and my aunt followed her. My grandfather and I stayed with Uncle Silas and the waiters, marvelling at the meat and drink that the men kept unloading from the wagons. The heavy summer air, fragrant already with the scents of grass and roses and the old lilac trees near the garden, was thick also with the smell of meat and beer and new warm bread.

'I never seed hams like 'em,' marvelled my grandfather.

'No, and you never will again,' said my uncle Silas.

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We went into the marquee and marvelled again at the joints, the roast ducks and chickens, the salads and wines, the bright sherried trifles, the wine jellies, the strange sauces and cakes and finicking tit-bits and sweets all arranged on the long white tables.

'Is there any mortal thing in the eatin' line as you ain't got, Silas?' said my grandfather.

'Nothing,' said my uncle Silas.

'And where's Abel?'

'Skulking upstairs like a young leveret. Frit to death.'

When we left the marquee and went across the paddock towards the house my uncle Silas bawled out: 'Abell!'

An upstairs window opened and Abel put his head out. Abel looked as though he had been carved crudely out of raw beef; he had a thick black wig of hair and the eyes of a mournful cow. There was something sleepy, simple, and pathetic about him. I believe my uncle Silas was eternally ashamed of him.

'Damn it, man,' said my uncle Silas, sharply, 'there's half the guests here a'ready and you still a-bed!'

'I ain't a-bed,' said Abel. 'I'm buttoning me shoes up.'

It was more than my uncle Silas could stand. 'Buttoning me shoes up,' he muttered, waddling off. 'Buttoning me belly button.'

And following him, we went into the garden. There we heard the nightingales again, one against another,

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tuning up, half sharp, half sweet, their notes enriched by the sultry summer air under the shelter of the pines. The scent of lilac in the full heaviness of its blossoming was like a drug, marvellously fragrant. The green peas were bursting into white flower and the first roses were crimsoning the house wall, their glossy leaves splashed with the white droppings of the swallows flying to and fro to nest under the thatch-eaves.

All the time we were in the garden my uncle Silas talked more garrulously and more excitedly than usual, and he was still very garrulous and excited when the cabs and wedding-flies drove up the lane to take us to church. And I remember saying to my mother again as he walked down the lane with us: 'Why can't he walk straight?'

'Sshh!' she whispered. 'It's this rough lane.'

We all drove to the church in flies and cabs drawn by white horses with polished hoofs and silk-ribboned bridles. There were more than a hundred guests, a great dazzle of white dresses and white buttonholes, and my uncle Silas looked magnificent. There was a sort of purposely devilish splendour about his light grey coat and trousers, his yellow carnation, his canary waistcoat, and his grey square bowler rakishly cocked askew as though to match that everlastingly devilish look in his blood-shot eye.

'Well,' said my grandmother, 'it might be a skittle-match to look at Silas.'

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The church was full, and I remember my grandfather saying to me: 'Don't want to hear a lot o' popery and hymn-singing, do you?' and we stayed outside together, looking for nests in the churchyard yews and reading the names on the tombstones until the wedding was over.

It was not until then, when the church door opened and the guests and the congregation began to flock into the churchyard that I saw Georgina.

'Ain't she flash?' whispered my grandfather. 'Didn't I say so?'

She was unforgettably lovely. As she came from the church-porch with Abel, who looked more than ever sober and simple in his suit of blue serge, his bowler hat, and his light brown button-boots which squeaked a little, she seemed to me more beautiful, more spirited, and more enchanting than perhaps she really was. She was very dark, her black hair and eyes shining vividly against her white wedding dress. Her face seemed full of a half-angelic, half-wicked vivacity and the conflicting lights and expressions of pure naivety and passion. She was across the churchyard and in the wedding-fly in a moment, and I did not see her again until we were all sitting about the long tables in the marquee eating and drinking and talking and laughing, with the sweating waiters rushing hither and thither, juggling with food and drink, madly trying to serve everyone at once.

And at the table-head, next to Georgina and Abel,

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sat my uncle Silas, and opposite him Lord Henry and Lady Hester, for whom Georgina and Abel worked. Lord Henry put on an eyeglass and read a speech, 'Ee heev greet pleesyah,' and so on, which we all applauded by banging the tables, making the glass and crockery dance and ring. After him, I remember, my uncle Silas rose with a sort of noble unsteadiness to his feet, waved his hands, almost pitched forward, clutched the table in time, took a drink to steady himself, and began a long, tipsy speech, which we half drowned with our table-banging and laughter, and of which all I can remember is a kind of refrain that he kept repeating as he gazed with a sort of sleepily wicked admiration at Georgina:

'Afore the night's gone we'll sing you a song. Me and the bride, eh?'

Georgina would smile without opening her lips, a marvellous, lovely, insinuating smile, and my uncle Silas would wink and proceed with his speech, breaking now and then into long words which he could not pronounce with his drink-fuddled lips.

'Silas has swallowed the dictionary,' someone remarked.

'Don't know what it is,' declared Silas, lifting his glass, 'but it wants a hem of a lot o' washing down.'

I could see my grandmother fuming, her lips set thin with exasperation. 'You won't catch me at another wedding with Silas,' she said, 'as long as I live. Not if I know it.'

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'Silas,' she said to him, severely, when the feast was over, 'you ain't responsible.'

'I know,' he said.

'If you go singing one of your pub-songs with that girl,' she warned him, 'I see you know about it.'

He cocked his eye at her with purposeful devilishness.

It was late in the evening, just after the May dusk had begun to fall, when my uncle Silas and Georgina sang their song. My grandmother protested and threatened, not knowing whether she was more disgusted with Silas for enticing the girl or with the girl for making a promise to sing a duet with a man who had been drunk since noon. She retired to the house, excusing herself when she found that the dew was falling. But I stayed outside, in the warm lilac-heavy air, and listened. The guests had been dancing on the grass to the music of two fiddles and a piano brought out of the house. There was such an atmosphere of laughter and happiness, and besides the fragrance of lilac and may-blossom a strange odour of bruised grass and moon-daisies that the dancers had trampled down. My uncle Silas and Georgina stood at the entrance to the marquee, and Silas took the girl's arm in his and they sang 'I'm Seventeen Come Sunday' without the fiddles or the piano. Uncle Silas had the ugliest voice in the world, and the girl's contralto seemed exquisite beside it. She put an unexpected spirit and passion into her voice:

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'Will you come to my mammy's house
When the moon shines bright and clearly?
And I'll come down and let you in
And my mammy shall not hear me.'

'Yes,' said my grandmother, who listened after all, from the house, 'and that's what she will do if I know anything.'

All the time my uncle Silas and Georgina were singing, Abel was watching her. His eyes never flickered or changed their expression of wide, mute adoration. He looked not only as if he would do anything for her, but as if he would forget or forgive anything she did. He seemed almost stupefied with love and worship of her.

When the song was over my uncle Silas kissed Georgina with a loud smack. Abel smiled with the serenity of pure adoration, while the guests laughed and applauded. In the silence before the music began for dancing again I could hear the nightingales singing unfrightened in the spinney, and the cuckoos, as in the morning, croaking across the darkening fields in mockery.

It was past midnight when we harnessed the trap and lighted the lamps and my grandfather led the horse down the lane. We could hear my uncle Silas bawling 'We won't go home till morning' long after we were on the road.

'I'll never come within fifty mile of a wedding with

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Silas if I live to be a thousand,' my grandmother kept declaring. 'And what in the wide world are you doing, man? Can't you drive straight?'

My grandfather could not drive straight, and my grandmother, reaching suddenly across my sleepy face, took the reins from him and slapped them across the back of the horse.

'Lord, I'd Georgina that girl if she were mine. Kissing Silas! — and he wasn't the only one she kissed, either. Saucy! — saucy ain't the word! Somebody's going to be led a fine old dance if I know anything about it. There's going to be trouble afore the year's out.'

But there was no dance and no trouble. Georgina died suddenly, in childbirth, the following spring. My uncle Silas is dead too. But I shall never forget their song, the girl's spirited loveliness, the feast in the marquee, the smell of lilac and wine and bruised grass, and the sound of the cuckoos contradicting the nightingales.

THE WATERFALL

I

THE only sound in the air as Rose Vaughan hurried across the park was the thin glassy sound of the waterfall emptying itself into the half-frozen lake. The snow that had fallen a few days after Christmas had thawed and half vanished already, leaving little snow islands dotted about the sere flattened grass among the wintry elms. It was freezing hard, the air silently brittle and bitter, the goose-grey sky threatening and even dropping at intervals new falls of snow, little handfuls of pure white dust that never settled. Now and then the black trees and the tall yellow reed-feathers and the dead plumes of pampas grass fringing the lake would stir and quiver, but with hardly a sound. The winter afternoon darkness gave the new skin of ice across the lake a leaden polish in which the shadows of a few wild duck were reflected dimly. The duck, silent and dark, stood motionless on the ice as though frozen there, but as the woman came down the path and crossed the wooden bridge over the lake-stream they rose up frightened, soaring swiftly and with wild quackings flying round and round, their outstretched necks dark against the wintry sky.

The woman, hurrying over the bridge and up the

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path under the trees, hardly noticed them. She walked with strange, long half-running strides, as though walking were not quick enough for her and running too undignified. As the path ascended sharply from the lake she began to pant a little, breathing the icy air in gasps through her mouth. There was the desperation of fear in her haste. Her father, the Reverend Ezekiel Vaughan, lay very ill at the rectory, which stood at the far end of the park, where she herself had been born and had lived for forty years and where she expected to go on living until she died; and she was hurrying to get across the park to the big house in order to telephone from there for the doctor. Her father was a man who had grown old before his time, and she had lived alone with him for so long that as she panted up the path, with her mouth a little open and her feet slipping backwards on the half-frozen path, she also looked prematurely middle-aged, her face joyless and negative, her pale grey eyes devoid of alertness and light.

She met no one coming down the path, and in her desperate hurry might not have seen them if she had. Until lately the path had been public, a right of way going far back in time, but at Christmas some deer in the park had been molested and the path closed. She and her father alone had been granted the special privilege of it. There had been a putting up and a breaking down of fences which had distressed her. She was distressed also because her father had said nothing,

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not a word, on the side of the people. 'My silence,' he said, 'will be ample evidence of my impartiality.' But it was clear enough, and to her painfully clear, that his sympathies were with Abrahams, the owner, whom he could not afford to offend. She had found herself despising for the first time the old liaison of church and property. It had struck her so forcibly that she had been angry, her anger breeding a kind of timid horror at the mere realization of that emotion. Alone, as she hurried up the path, it was difficult to realize that she had ever cherished emotions, sinful emotions, like hatred and anger. And she felt ashamed, the pain of her conscience mingling with the pain of her fears.

Where the path divided into two she took the left-hand turn to the house. The right-hand path, formerly a way to the vicarage, had been cut off by a new snake-fence. She saw that the fence had been smashed down again. It had happened since the snow. She could see the scars and fractures made by the axes on the new skinned chestnut stakes and the black footprints in the islands of snow.

She felt at once distressed again and as she hurried on she half resolved to speak to Abrahams. She would reason with him; she would make him see the pettiness of it all. He must see it. And she would make him see it, not for her own sake nor for her own satisfaction, but for his own sake and the sake of his fellow men. Words of entreaty and reason came easily to her mind: 'What you give comes back to you. It comes back a thousand

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fold. Surely you don't need me to tell you?' softened and quickened by her fears and agitations about her father.

But suddenly the house appeared from behind its dark barricade of yew and pine. The sight of it, huge and red, with its weather-green cupola high on the grey roof, made her suddenly and inexplicably nervous, and her footsteps on the gravel drive and their echo among the trees seemed painfully loud to her in the frost-silent air.

She hurried up the steps leading to the terrace and the house. Along the terrace formal rows of flower-beds lay bleak and empty, the earth snow-flattened and lifeless. She rang the big brass door-bell and waited, apprehensive. A servant came, she murmured a request about the telephone, and a moment later she was in the entrance-hall, the door shut behind her.

The telephone stood on a large mahogany table in the hall. She sat down in a chair by the table, picked up the receiver and gave her number. She spoke very low, so that Abrahams, if he were about, should not hear her; but the operator could not catch what she said and asked her once, twice and then even a third time, to repeat the number. She repeated it, her face growing hot and scarlet, her voice in her own ears so loud that she felt she was shouting and that Abrahams would hear and come into the hall. Her fears were multiplied into panic, all her resolutions to speak to Abrahams driven away. She gave her message for the

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doctor quickly, too quickly, so that again she had to repeat the words, and again louder.

In the middle of this confusion she became conscious of another voice. It was Abrahams, saying:

'Let me see what I can do, Miss Vaughan.'

In another moment he was standing by her, had the telephone from her hands and was half-shouting: 'A message for the doctor. Yes, yes. Put a jerk in it, do. Ask him to come at once, for the Reverend. Yes, he's very bad. It's urgent. For the Reverend at once, please.'

She stood apart half-nervous, half-affronted, until he had finished speaking. His way of speaking about her father, off-handedly as it were, as the Reverend, offended her. Yet when he put down the receiver she was bound to murmur her thanks.

'And now I must go,' she added quickly.

'Oh, stop an' have a cup o' tea,' he began.

'Oh no, I must get back,' she said. 'I'm urgently needed. I must get back.'

'Ah, you can swallow a cup o' tea in a jiff,' he insisted. 'It'll help to keep the cold out.'

But she was at the door, rigid, drawing on her thin kid gloves. Against her prim nervous voice Abrahams' seemed aggressively loud, almost coarsely self-confident. He himself was big-framed, getting to stoutness, his hair very grey above the red temples. He cultivated the prosperous country air, with loose check tweeds, a gold watch chain, and brown boots as polished

as a chestnut. But his butterfly-collar, stiff and white, and his black necktie upset the effect. He had made his money quickly, out of boots and shoes, during the war period, rising from nothing. The tightness, the struggle of the early years had left its mark ineffaceably on his features, his lips compressing narrowly and his eyes hardening, at unexpected moments, with unconscious avarice. Coming out into the country, to enjoy his money, he had lost his wife within a year, and had presented the church with a window of stained glass in her memory. He still had about him the hardness, the bluster and the coarseness of the factory. And it was this about him which intimidated her and made her draw on her gloves, more rigidly and hastily, by the door.

Seeing that she would not stay he stood with his hand on the big iron door-latch.

‘And how is the Reverend?’ he asked.

‘He’s very ill,’ she said, ‘very ill.’

‘I’m sorry to hear it, I am that, very sorry.’

It seemed an unconscionable time before he began to lift the door latch. In the interval, remembering her resolution to speak about the fence, she half-reproached herself: it was her duty, now that her father could no longer speak, to say something. It was clearly her duty. But still she said nothing. The words she had formed so clearly and easily in her mind had been driven away by her foolish panic and fear.

‘Ah, well, if you must go,’ said Abrahams, lifting the door latch.

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'I *must* go,' she said. Her voice was strangely distant with its prim, polite emphasis.

'Anything I can do? Can I have anything sent down?' he said.

'Nothing,' she said. 'Thank you. Nothing at all.'

She fled, buttoning her coat collar against the freezing air, not glancing back, knowing by the long interval before the sound of the door clanging, that he was watching her.

Down by the lake the waterfall fell with an even sharper, thinner sound in the ice-covered lake. The duck had not returned and the ice was empty of all life, growing darker every moment. Little patches of new black ice and frozen snow cracked under her feet as she panted up the path, beyond the lake, towards the rectory. The house, its grey stone drabbened but unsoftened by time and rain, stood half-hidden by a line of elms, a gaunt solitary place, walled in, with half its windows plastered over long ago, a squat stone belfry in the roof of the disused stables, a light burning in a single upstairs window. She hurried on, apprehensive, fearing the worst intuitively, falling into the old half-running, half-walking pace, hardly pausing to shut the gate in the stone wall of the garden.

Before she could reach the house the front door opened and the white figure of the servant-girl appeared and stood there ready to meet her. With tears in her voice she began to tell Rose Vaughan what she already half-knew, that her father was dead.

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II

She spent the first days of the New Year putting things in order, on wet days indoors, arranging her father's papers, packing his sermons into neat piles, which she tied together with tape, rejecting old letters, reading through them and sometimes weeping a little and then reproaching herself both for reading and weeping. On fine days she and the servant-girl carried the rejected papers out to the garden, in clothes-baskets, and set fire to them under the elms, but the earth and the dead elm leaves were never dry and the papers burnt sluggishly, with thick harsh smoke that hung under the wet trees and stung the women's eyes. At last rain set in, dismally and as though it would last the year, and a south-west wind that cried in the house and howled in the black dripping elms. The burnt and half-burnt scraps of paper were blown about the garden like black and white leaves until the rain soddened them at last and the wind hurled them into corners and under the clumps of dead chrysanthemum stalks that had never been cut down. Driven indoors again with no papers to arrange, the women scrubbed and polished the floors and furniture and washed the pictures and the windows. In that large house, built more than a hundred years before for a more spacious family than had ever lived in it, there were rooms which had never been used and some which had never been opened for

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twenty years. The women flung open their windows and the rain blew in on the mice-chimble floor-boards, the old travelling-trunks, the piles of faded and forgotten church magazines, the rotting sunshades, the disused croquet sets, the piles of half-rotten apples laid out on sheets of *The Times* to dry for that winter and even the winter before. The women worked with a great show of noise and hustle, tiring themselves out in an unconscious effort to efface the effect and the memory of death.

Finally it was done: all the rooms had been cleaned and aired, the last of the big heavy foot-worn carpets had been turned and re-laid, the clumsy mahogany furniture had been polished and set back in its original places, as though it had never been moved. And suddenly there was nothing to do. The wet January days, which had seemed so short, began to seem very long, and the house, which had seemed so bustling and alive, began to recapture the air of silence and death.

Like a veneer, the lively effect of clearing-up the house began to wear off, leaving a drab under-surface of realities, a troublesome sense of loss, a dread of loneliness and bills and formalities. There was a will. The rector had left a little over a hundred and fifty pounds. With the books and the furniture, it was to come to Rose; so that there would, perhaps, after the sale, be two hundred and fifty pounds.

She realized that it was nothing. It might last her,

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with care, with extreme, bitter care, for five years — no more than a day out of the life which lay before her. To supplement it she might do a little private teaching. She would see: she would have to see. The house would no longer be hers; there would, of course, be another rector. These things seemed to her a cruel complication of realities, a kind of equation she had never been brought up to solve.

But one thing she saw, instantly. The servant must go. And having sacked her she felt at once an insufferable loneliness. Parishioners called in the afternoons and she called in return on them, but after darkness she sat there, in the vast house, absolutely alone, with nothing to think of except herself and her dead father, her mind fretted by its own fears and its half-imagined fears. She was driven to bed at nine o'clock and then eight and even earlier, with the Bible from which her father had taught her to read a passage every night since childhood. Upset one evening and going up to bed early to cry herself to sleep she woke, half through the night, to remember that she had forgotten, for the first time, for as long as she could remember, to read that passage. She went downstairs with a candle to find her Bible. As she came back the candle-light fell on something white lying in the passage, by the front door. She picked it up, a letter.

It was a note from Abrahams, asking her if she could not go up to tea on the following day. Inexplicably she felt offended. The very tone and language of the

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letter seemed offensive: 'What about coming to tea one day, say to-morrow (Thursday). Should like to discuss question of memorial to Reverend. Need not reply. Will send car.' It was so common, so detestable that she felt quite suddenly enraged.

In the morning, trying to forget the letter, she succeeded only in recalling its words and renewing her own annoyance. She went about in a state of prim, rigid vexation, the very attitude she would adopt if she were to meet Abrahams. But beneath it all she was inexplicably afraid of seeing him.

And quite suddenly she saw it differently. She would go: of course she would go. Not to go would seem so childish, so discourteous. She was not sure that it was not even her duty to go.

So in the afternoon she was ready, in black except for the thin stitched lines of white on the back of her tight black gloves, when the car arrived. No sooner was she sitting silent, behind the chauffeur, than she wished she had not come.

As the car drove down the hill from the rectory, towards the village, and then up by the private road through the park she stared out of the windows at the wet January landscape, noticing for the first time the red misty flush of elm and beech buds, and then, in the park, the first flicker of aconites, coldest yellow, uncurling in the winter grass. Farther up, under the shelter of the house and its yews, a few odd half-opened snowdrops, like frailest white toadstools, bloomed

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about the grass. The flowers, so early, filled her with a sense of comfort shot with flashes of envy.

In the house it was so warm that she could have fallen asleep. She and Abrahams sat by a huge fire of wood in the drawing-room, she with her hat and gloves still on, parochial fashion, the words 'I mustn't stay' rising from long foolish habit to her prim lips.

'Ah, make yourself at home,' said Abrahams, genially.

Dotted about the room, on tables and in the deep window sills, were bowls of blue and white hyacinths, whose fragrance she breathed with an unconscious show of deep pleasure, longingly.

Abrahams seemed pleased and was telling her how he had planted the bulbs himself and how much he had given for them when tea arrived, the pot and jugs and tray of silver.

'After tea I'll show you in the conservatory,' said Abrahams. 'Interested in flowers, I know?'

'I am indeed,' she said.

She had withdrawn herself again, sitting stiff, straight up, on the edge of the chair.

'Take your things off,' Abrahams insisted, 'while I pour out. You'll be cold when you go out again.'

'Oh! I mustn't stay.'

'Be blowed. What's your hurry? Not such a lot to get back for, have you?'

She could have wept. There was a kind of forced geniality about his words which seemed to her brutal.

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They were full, too, of unconscious truth. She knew so very well that there was no hurry, that she had nothing to get back for. And she could have wept at her own hypocrisy and from the pain of his unconscious truth and brutality. But she removed her gloves instead, finger by finger, aloof and meticulous, folding and pressing them on her lap and then gently rubbing the blood back into her starved white fingers.

'You're cold,' said Abrahams. 'Why don't you come nearer the fire?'

'My hands are just a little chilled,' she told him. 'That's all.'

'Know what they say!' he laughed. 'Cold hands — warm heart.'

She was frigid. She tried to put into her silence an austere disapproval of that familiarity. It did not succeed. He had poured out tea and was handing the cup to her, not noticing either the austerity of her silence or her sudden confusion as she took the cup.

'You drink that — you'll feel a little warmer about the gills.'

'Thank you,' she said.

With the cup in her hands she tried to renew the old austere silence. But she needed the tea and she began to drink with tiny sips, cautiously, the thin scraggy guides of her neck tautening as she tried to swallow noiselessly. Abrahams drank also, stirring his tea briskly and then drinking with quick guzzling sips. Watching him, she forgot her resolution to be

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silent in her revulsion at the sound of his loud sipping and the sight of the tea-drips shining like spittle on the bristles of his greyish moustache.

She watched him, fascinated, until he put down his cup and wiped his tea-wet moustache with the back of his hand.

‘Well now,’ he said, ‘about the Reverend.’

She wanted to protest, as always, against the use of that word. It was the very emblem of his familiar vulgarity. But it was useless. He went on quickly, before she could speak:

‘I like to see a man have his due and — well, no use beating about the bush, Miss Vaughan. I should like to see a memorial put up to the Reverend. That’s what. A stone or a window — anything, I don’t care as long as it’s for the church and is worthy of your father.’

He stopped abruptly. With her cup still in her hands, Miss Vaughan was crying, the thin half-checked tears falling soundlessly on her black dress and into her tea-cup.

He let her go on, without a word or a gesture. And vaguely she was aware of his silence as being a comfort to her, and her tears began to come more easily, without pain, giving her relief.

At last she could blow her nose and lift her head and glance sideways through the window, in the pretence that nothing had happened and in the hope also that he would act as though nothing had happened.

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But he took her cup, and emptying the slops into the basin, said:

'Nothing like a good cry. I know what it is to lose someone.'

The words brought the tears stinging up to her eyes again, but she twisted her lips and kept silent. She felt sorry, then, not for herself but for him.

'I should — ' she began, but she could go no further.

'Don't worry,' he said. 'Drink your tea.'

She found herself obeying, drinking with confusion but with a strange and inexplicable sense of comfort.

'We can talk about it later,' he said.

She only nodded. Her eyes were red from crying and her voice hardly audible, and in her black clothes and black hat she looked old and pale, tired out.

He suddenly jumped up. 'I was going to show you the conservatory, wasn't I?'

The old prim austerity of manner came back to her as his voice resumed its turn of familiarity.

'Oh! no, I think I must go.'

But he took no notice and before she could protest they were through the hall, where she had once used the telephone, and through the glass doors leading to the conservatory, the damp warmth of the place and the breath of its flowers and ferns meeting them heavily and sweetly as they entered.

He was very proud of the place. He had fitted up electric lamps in the roof along the stages where the flowers stood and he began to switch the lights on and

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then off and then on again so that she could see the difference between the flower-colours and greenness in the raw January light and in the white lamp-brilliance. The scents of hyacinth and freesia were exotic, the colours of the waxy petals very pure and delicate. And unconsciously, for the first time, she lived for a few moments outside herself, delighting in the flowers, forgetting that attitude of parochial stiffness which she had worn for so long that it was almost like second nature. Abrahams, delighted also, gave one or two of his sudden heavy laughs and she laughed also almost without realizing it. Between the laughter she touched and breathed the flowers, all except the frail powdery pink and yellow primulas, cowslip-scented, which he would not let her touch.

'You don't want to be infected, do you?' he asked.

'With what?'

He told of the skin disease which the touch of the primula could give.

'Oh! that's just a story,' she cried.

'No, it's right.'

'Well! I don't care!' she cried. She buried her face in the pink candelabra of blossoms with a sensation of doing something very delicious and abandoned.

It was not until she was back, alone, in the silence of the rectory that the significance of her behaviour struck her fully, and at the thought of it she broke out in a perspiration of shame, her prim soul curling up within her with horror. Oh! she had been very stupid. It

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had all been very silly, very thoughtless. And memory only made it more vivid and painful.

She went to bed early, trying to forget it. But in the morning a messenger and a message arrived from Abrahams, the messenger with pots of pink hyacinth and primula, the message asking her if she would go to tea, and again discuss the memorial, on Sunday.

As she read the note and saw the flowers she went very weak.

'There is no answer,' she said.

She went about for the rest of the week in an agony of shame and indecision. Yet the answer had to be written. There was no help for it. It was her duty to write.

She delayed answering till Saturday and then wrote, fearfully, to say that she would endeavour to look in, if she might, after Sunday school. The word endeavour she felt, kept her at an austere distance. It made her answer negative of all emotion, saved her from new embarrassments.

In the park the aconites had opened back flat, vivid lemon, in the watery January sun, and higher up, under the yews there were myriad snowdrops among the stiff dark crocus leaves. And again, in spite of herself, she was envious.

She put on the old prim parochial attitude, sitting with her gloves on, as Abrahams talked of the memorial to her in the warm drawing-room. 'Yes, I see,' she would say, in agreement; or 'I am not prepared to

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say,' in disagreement. It was as if she were stiffly resolved not to commit herself, again, either to tears or laughter.

'Well then,' said Abrahams, as she rose to go, 'you'll decide between the broken column and the stained window.'

'It is very kind of you.'

'The sooner we know the better. What if you come up again on Sunday?'

'Oh! I really don't know.'

She spoke as though terrified, as though to say 'Yes' and to come again were against all her most cherished principles of duty and propriety.

'You can send a note and tell me,' said Abrahams, 'when I send some more flowers.'

She fled, half-glad to be back in the rectory with its silence and damp book-odours and solitude.

But on the following Sunday she was half-glad to leave it again. The agony of the silence and solitude had begun to wear her thin and white, thinner and whiter even than before. To see the aconites, to sit in the warm drawing-room, to talk with a fellow-creature again — it was all a little intoxicating to her.

Then, quite suddenly without preparation, as they were having tea and talking of the memorial, deciding on the stained glass, Abrahams asked if she would marry him.

She sat silent, staring, her face absolutely blank in pained astonishment. Suddenly, as if to reassure her,

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Abrahams smiled. She turned upon him instantly with a voice of half-weeping protest:

'You're joking! You're joking.'

He rose and put his arm on her shoulder. 'No, no. I'm serious, I mean it.'

'I — I — I . . .' but she could not speak and he sat for a long time with his arm on her shoulders while she sat struggling with her tears and astonishment.

'Don't cry,' he said. 'Don't cry. All in good time.'

She wept openly. He reasoned with her a little afterwards, but it was that unexpected tenderness in his voice which finally decided her. She tried to reason against it all, but the recollection of that emotion always triumphed.

A week later she accepted. The question of love never touched her. She had long ago begun to teach herself that marriage and love were words which did not interest her. She reasoned that it was not a question of love, but of duty, and she was secure in that.

They were married in the spring.

III

The rains of late winter continued desolately into spring, drenching the crocuses until they bent over like limp spent candles of orange and purple and white, weighing down the first greenish canary buds of the daffodils by the lake, along all the low-lying land by the stream, the park was flooded, the young leaves of

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celandine struggling up, yellow-tipped, through the water, and Abrahams was worried because even when the rain ceased and the sun had attained its first spring-power, the water did not drain away. In his concern he would walk down to the stream every morning, testing the height of the water by the wooden stakes he had had driven in and marked, pacing up and down the grass, pausing often, to consider what might be done. He would come back to lunch with a frown on his face, impatient: he wanted the place right, and he must have it right, he would have it right. Rose would say nothing but 'Yes' or 'No' as his tone demanded, obedient to a half-conscious resolution never to assert herself, never to disagree, never to do anything which might bring them into a state of intimacy. She often committed a kind of sin against herself in order to keep up that negative serenity. If Abrahams suggested deepening the stream she too would say, 'I was thinking so myself', or if he changed his mind abruptly, thinking that he might raise the banks of the stream, she would change her mind also, saying, 'I feel sure it would be better'. But it was a sin of duty, the sin that she had practised so long with her father that it was already both a habit and a virtue. She was scarcely conscious of it. And if Abrahams asked, as he did very rarely, for her opinion, she would manage, by some remark like, 'Oh! it's quite beyond my poor brain,' to excuse herself and at the same time flatter him. Whatever he did must be right.

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So when the question of the floods and the stream worried Abrahams she was worried also, and going down to the stream with him one afternoon she stood or paced about the grass in a pretence of harassed thought, just as he did. At last, when Abrahams had walked far up the brook to survey from a fresh point, she sat down for a moment on the deer-smoothed bole of an elm and watched the flood water and the yellow hosts of celandine in the damp places beyond. The stream itself came down quietly and the spring air was so still that she could hear every drop of its gentle fall into the lake below. Then, quite suddenly, as she sat watching and listening, the whole problem of the flood seemed clear to her. Surely all that they had to do was to widen the stream and deepen its fall and make a new weir into the lake, so that the stream could take more water and take it faster.

She got up and called Abrahams, timidly, and when he came back to her she told him, repeating often 'I know it's quite silly and impossible'. He listened and walked down to the waterfall and then, looking upstream, considered it all. Standing still, she watched the sunlight on the flowers and the water again in a state of timid apprehension until he disturbed her with a shout of excitement:

'You've got it!' He was already hurrying upstream to her. 'Can't think why it didn't come to me before. Can't imagine for the life of me why I didn't think of it.' He was very excited.

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'Oh! You would have thought of it,' she said.

'I don't know so much, I don't know so much,' he kept saying, as they hurried back to the house. 'You must have been thinking it all out on the quiet.'

'Oh! no, oh no,' she said. 'Only sometimes I used to notice that even when there was water still standing about there was only a trickle at the waterfall.'

'And I never noticed it,' he marvelled. 'And I never noticed it. You're a bit of a marvel.'

'Oh! no,' she deprecated. 'It's nothing, really it's nothing.'

Back at the house he telephoned to the drainage engineers: they would send over a man in the morning, early.

In the morning, soon after breakfast, a little flap-hooded car, mud-flecked and ramshackle, chattered up the drive, swishing the gravel recklessly. A young man alighted and rang the front door bell six times, with comic effect, and Abrahams, in his enthusiasm, answered the door himself, and a moment or two later the car started again and chattered away into the park. When it returned again to the house, just before one o'clock, Abrahams and the young man seemed to be hilarious.

'Rose,' said Abrahams as they came in to lunch. 'This is the engineer, Mr. Phillips.'

Hearing their laughter, she had put on something of the old prim austerity of manner, in unconscious disapprobation.

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'How d'ye do, Mrs. Abrahams?' said Phillips, shaking hands; and catching in a flash the feeling of cool distance in her outstretched hand: 'I'll bet you wondered what the tide had washed up, didn't you, Mrs. Abrahams?'

'I did wonder,' she said, 'what all the laughter was about.'

'Oh! Mr. Phillips is a case,' said Abrahams. 'He's a fair caution. I haven't laughed so much for years.'

'Ah! but be careful,' said Phillips. He advanced, and tapping Abrahams waistcoat, said with a mock seriousness that set Abrahams tittering again: 'Do you know, sir, that the valves of your heart are worn out? Yes sir, worn out. Absolutely finished. You may go pop any minute. Punctured.'

And as Abrahams wiped the tears of laughter from his eyes Rose smiled a small, half-stiff, half-indulgent smile with unparted lips.

At the lunch table Phillips was irrepressible. He was a rather small, fleshy man, with a cherubic face and little vivid eyes that shone and quivered like blue glass marbles, with ecstatic joviality. His face was the face of a true comedian. He was never still, never silent. His eyes travelled electrically everywhere, untiringly, in search of fresh jokes, jokes which, when they came, might have been in bad taste, but for some reason never were. Rose sat at first aloof and frigid, as though ready to freeze the first germ of indelicacy or blasphemy, but it never came. 'The wages of gin,'

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said Phillips once, taking up his water to drink, 'is breath.' Her face stiffened, then, with its first and only sign of offence, a sign that was lost on both Phillips and Abrahams, laughing into their serviettes. After that she sat a little less strained and less upright, though still with a shadow of severity in her face, her smiles mere polite motions of her thin lips. Phillips saw this, and as though it were all a game in which she must keep her lips set and smiling while he tried to make her smile in spite of it, he began to direct his jokes at her. It flattered her subtly and gradually, in spite of herself, she felt warmer and more tolerant of him, and at last she broke out softly, 'Oh! Mr. Phillips, you're too bad!'

'You'll laugh, Mrs. Abrahams, you'll laugh if you're *not* careful,' cried Phillips. 'You'll laugh, as sure as my name's Napoleon. You will — I warn you. You'll laugh. Now, now! — smile but don't laugh. Smile — ' he threw his serviette over his head, like a photographer, his voice comically muffled, — '*smile* please. That's it — now hold it — the left hand clasped on the right — splendid — exquisite — how delighted *he* will be — enchanting! Hold it — one — moment — tchtk!'

He threw the serviette off his head, making gestures of mock despair. 'But you *laughed* — you *laughed*,' he cried.

'Oh dear,' she said, her face flushed and her eyes moist with confusion and laughter. 'And no wonder.'

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'Ah! didn't I tell you he was a case!' cried Abrahams.

'Oh! how silly of me,' said Rose, wiping her eyes.

Phillips was still making them laugh, Rose still half against herself, when they went down to the lake in the afternoon. Rose was unprepared to go, but first Abrahams and then Phillips insisted, Abrahams saying:

'It's really my wife's idea — she first saw how it could be done.'

'Oh, no, really,' said Rose.

'Now, now, Mrs. Abrahams,' Phillips joked. 'Come, come. Don't be afraid. The big man will pull out the nasty tooth and then it will all be over.'

'Really you could do much better without me,' she said.

But she went with them, protesting a little out of politeness and biting her lips or twisting them in order to keep her laughter quite circumspect. By the lake the kingcups had opened wide, their yellow petals glistening as though varnished, and further up the slopes of grass, in the damp places, the first lady smocks trembled, tenderest mauve, still half shut, on fragile stems. In the hollow by the flood water the sun was quite hot, and Rose, sitting down on an elm-bole again, could hear spring in the silence, a silence broken only by the singing of larks, far up, and the trickling of the waterfall, both very sweet and soft, the water faintest, like an echo of the birds.

While she sat there, Abrahams and the engineer surveyed the stream, made notes, took measurements,

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and at intervals laughed a great deal. When they returned to her Abrahams was simmering with enthusiasm, like a boy — it could be done, the thing could be done, easily, just as she had said it could!

‘Not easily,’ cried Phillips, serious for once. ‘It will take time — all summer.’

‘Time’s nothing,’ said Abrahams. ‘Nor money. I want the thing done, that’s all.’

Phillips returned to the house for tea. Abrahams had taken a fancy to him, there was more laughter, and at last Abrahams suggested that Phillips, instead of driving backwards and forwards from the town each day, should come and spend the summer at the house with them. It would be so much easier, so much more convenient. Phillips seemed to hesitate and then said:

‘Could I fish in the lake?’

‘Fish? You’re not joking? You can fish, swim, row — do anything.’

‘I should like to come then,’ said Phillips.

Before the week was out he had brought over his belongings, and before the end of another week the work by the lake was in progress, a band of workmen arriving each morning in a lorry and Phillips driving down in his dilapidated car soon afterwards, to superintend. He rushed hither and thither all morning, electric, untiring, coming back to the house at noon to eat a hasty meal, flying off a joke or two, and then returning. Dumps of yellow clay and piles of pink

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brick and wooden shacks for the workmen appeared by the lake and became visible from the house through the half-leaved trees.

Every afternoon, if it were fine, Rose and Abrahams walked down to watch the work. She, while Abrahams talked with Phillips, sat on the elm-bole and watched the workmen digging out the pure yellow clay, like stiff cheese, as they deepened and widened the trench which later would be the new water-course. Farther up they had dammed the stream and only a thin trickle of water came down the trench, so that the waterfall was soundless and dry.

On the first evenings, when the dusk still fell early and a little cold, Abrahams and Phillips would go into the billiard room and the click of the billiard balls would be drowned by their boisterous laughter until Rose at last would join them, ostensibly to see if they needed anything but in reality to share that laughter.

And gradually it became an unconscious habit to go down to the lake each afternoon and into the billiard room each evening. It was not until the evenings became longer and warmer and the two men began to play a game of bowls on the lawn that it became a conscious thing, something to which she looked forward. Realizing it, she reproved herself at once, and she did not go down to watch the work for two afternoons. But first Phillips and then Abrahams noticed it and Phillips made gentle banter about it, half teasing. Strangely, she felt hurt, and the next

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afternoon she went down to watch the work again. But Phillips was not there. When Abrahams explained that he had gone off on business for the afternoon she felt a spasm of unexpected disappointment that was almost a shock.

It was already early June, and Phillips had gone into town, not on business, but to fetch his fishing-tackle. In the evening and again the next evening he was at the lake and she did not see him until late. Coming back on the second evening he carried an immense basket, covered with green reeds, staggering along with it like a man with a load of lead. The basket was for her — an offering. He went through mock solemnities. At last, when she removed the reeds it was to reveal a roach, pink and silver, no bigger than a sardine. It was all that the basket contained. At the joke Abrahams and Phillips went off into explosive laughter.

It was a laughter in which, inexplicably, she could not join. She felt hurt again, and again without knowing why. It was as if they were laughing at her, and she could not bear it. She reproached herself: it was so silly, such a trivial thing. What was she thinking about? What was coming over her? Yet the sense of injury remained.

For a day or two she felt a strange resentment against Phillips. She went down to the lake, but she hardly spoke to him, and in the evenings his laughter irritated her. And suddenly she closed up, as into a

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shell again, with all the old primness and straight-lipped austerity.

Phillips, as before, noticed it.

'Have I done anything to offend you?' he said, one afternoon by the stream.

'To offend me?' she said. 'Why should I be offended?'

But the very tone of her voice was offended. As soon as he had walked away she hurried over the bridge, past the lake, and took the old path up to the rectory. At the top of the slope she sat down, in the sunshine, to regain her breath and think and come to a decision about it all. When she got up again she had solved the problem with the old formula and was half-content. It was her duty to behave differently to him. She would make amends. She would apologize. It was her duty to apologize.

Yet the days went past and she never apologized. She began to avoid Phillips and then, having avoided him, would feel wretched. He, absorbed in his fishing, seemed to take not the faintest notice of her.

She half made up her mind that if he spoke to her again she would make the fishing an excuse for her behaviour. He had begun to fish on Sundays. She objected to that. Yet, when he asked if she objected she said 'No', as if she had not the heart to rob him of that pleasure. And so he fished all day on Sundays, taking food with him, sitting lost in the reeds that grew taller and ranker as the summer richened to

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midsummer, and to the first arid days of July. Coming back in the evening there would be the same jocularity as ever, the same mocking play on something, the same roars of laughter from Abrahams. She sat aloof, as though it did not interest her. Then, after one intense cloudless blazing Sunday by the lake, Phillips returned in the evening without a single fish, not even a stickle-back, not so much as an undergrown roach with which to play another joke on her.

For the first time since she had known him Phillips was silent, in absolute dejection. She could not resist the opportunity.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘perhaps it will be a lesson to you.’

‘A lesson? — What in?’

‘A lesson not to abuse the sabbath.’

He burst into roars of laughter. ‘So you think the fish know Sunday when it comes!’ he said.

There was no derision either in his words or his laughter. But she was bitterly hurt again. Yet it comforted her to go about nursing that sense of injury secretly.

Then also she hoped that he would, perhaps, take notice of what she had said and not go to the lake on the following Sunday. It would mean that he had, once at least, taken her seriously.

But the next Sunday, when she came down to breakfast, he had already gone. Hard and aloof, she put on her white gloves and went to church with Abrahams. It was nothing, she must forget it, it

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meant nothing to her. But she was troubled and would not acknowledge it and by noon she had fretted herself into a strange state of misery which her denials only increased.

In the afternoon she could endure it no longer. She left Abrahams asleep and went out into the hot Sunday stillness, across the Terrace and down into the park. She had made up her mind: she would walk by the lake, he would see her, she would speak to him, there would be an end of it all.

As she walked along, in and out of the great tree shadows, she reasoned out what she would say. It seemed very simple: she would say that his violation of her dearest principles had hurt her. That was all. Not those very words, perhaps, but she would convey that. She would make him understand.

Before she was aware of it she was by the lake. Panic-stricken, she hurried along, looking straight ahead along the reed-fringed bank, never pausing once until she caught sight, on the opposite bank, of Phillips, in his shirt-sleeves, watching over his rod, the wet float flashing scarlet in the white sunlight. But she hurried along, terrified that he might see her or shout, never pausing even when she was out of sight.

Back at the house she was angry that he had not noticed her. She felt that he had seen her and then, purposely, with deliberate indifference, had ignored her. And then, illogically, she felt a moment of acute tenderness for him. Perhaps, after all, he had not seen

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her, had been too absorbed even to look up. She must not misjudge him. It was her duty not to misjudge him.

For some weeks she went about half-comforted and half-troubled by the renewal of that anger and tenderness, not understanding either. Then one morning, at breakfast, Phillips declared:

'Well, another week and you can turn on the new tap.'

She sat very straight in her chair, prim but intense.

'Then you will be leaving us?' she said.

'Yes — no more fishing on Sundays.'

She could not speak.

A week later the work of the lake was finished.

'Mrs. Abrahams ought to pull the lever,' suggested Phillips.

'Oh! no!' she said. 'Really no.'

'But that's only proper,' said Abrahams. 'It was your idea. Yes, you pull the lever. We must do it properly.'

'But I shouldn't be strong enough,' she protested desperately.

'You don't need to be,' said Phillips. 'I'll work it so that just a touch will be enough.'

'It's easy,' said Abrahams. 'Phillips will make it easy.'

She gave in. On the afternoon itself she walked down to the lake with Abrahams and Phillips. The first trees were turning yellow, a few leaves floated about the still lake, and the air was very quiet. An

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odd workman or two stood about and she felt very nervous. Phillips had arranged it so that she should raise a lever and that the old dam should collapse and release the water. It was very simple.

Everything was ready. Phillips and Abrahams and the workmen stood waiting. She lifted her hand to the lever and then, at the last moment, hesitated. Her hands were trembling.

'All you have to do is pull the lever,' said Phillips quietly. 'It's easy.'

The next moment she made an immense effort. She clenched the lever desperately and pulled it.

There was a sudden crash as the dam itself collapsed and then a roar, increasing rapidly, as the water tore down through the new channel, with Phillips and Abrahams running excitedly along the banks, to see the first leap of water into the lake, and then at last there was a sound of thunder as the water fell. The sound for a moment was terrific. She stood in suspense, startled. At her feet the water tore down the channel furiously, so that she went giddy from looking at it, and there was a shower of soft white spray as the torrent thundered into the lake. She had never believed that there could be so much water. She stood pale and motionless, with tears in her eyes, not knowing what to do.

The tears began to run down her cheeks. Afraid that the men might see her she suddenly turned away and began to walk away up the slope under the trees.

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She heard the voices of the men call after her but she did not turn. Her tears kept on and behind her the torrent of water roared with soft thunder. She began to hurry, trying to dry her tears as she did so, but fresh tears filled her eyes as fast as she wiped them away and the sound of the waterfall followed her persistently. She hurried on as though afraid of it and long after she could hear it no more, the echo of it, like a remembered emotion, thundered through her mind.

The next morning Phillips went away.

INNOCENCE

A CHILD had wandered from the security of his mother's potato-patch. The afternoon was a silent infinity of shimmering heat, but in the field beyond the garden the young grass had begun to grow sweet again after hay-time, making a cool lawn in the waste of July.

Nothing moved across the flat green face of the field except flickering butterflies electric with sunlight, scraps of turquoise and lemon, tortoiseshell and ivory, soft and light as flying flowers. The child regarded them with apathetic interest, his eyes vainly hunting them. Once he took off his broad white sun-hat and held it poised, but the shadow of it had scarcely fallen on the grass before there was a mocking flicker of yellow brilliance far away among the potato-flowers. He listlessly put on his hat again and solemnly advanced across the field, his hands deep in the pocket of his miniature trousers. The sun-hat, too large for him, made him look like a little old man walking across a vast bowling-green in meditation. The butterflies seemed no longer to interest him. It was too hot for him even to watch them.

At the far end of the field stood a house, half-hidden by a forest of flowerless lilacs and dim laurels and unpruned fruit-trees. The faded yellow blinds of the house were drawn against the sun and the doors stood shut and blistering, giving it a deserted air. The

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garden was a wilderness of trees and sweet-briar, untidy hollyhocks with shabby pink buttons just unfolding, blood-bright poppies that had sown themselves in thousands about the flower-beds and the paths and on the front door-step itself. The air seemed sleepy with poppy odour. The brilliant scarlet heads blazed like signals of danger.

As the child approached the house he began to walk with a curious nonchalance. He squinted at something on a most distant horizon and sometimes he appeared to be searching intently for something in the grass or the sky. The house might not have existed. The child walked towards it with a serene and aimless innocence.

Nevertheless that innocence was suspicious, for he walked in a perfect line to a point where the garden fence had broken, making a gap large enough for a dog to squeeze through under cover of the lilacs and laurels. As he approached the gap his innocence became angelic. He stooped to pick a white clover-bloom. He sniffed it languidly, plucked another and sniffed that also. He wandered in beautiful rings in the grass, ostensibly searching. All the time his eyes were upon the house, wickedly furtive and longingly alert.

He presently sidled sleepily towards the gap. In his sleepiness he appeared to be not only innocent but blind. Nevertheless his eyes in one swift flicker took in the safe emptiness of the field behind him and of the garden ahead.

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He vanished suddenly through the hedge with a flash of white, like a rabbit. He crawled through the mass of trees and briar on his hands and knees and finally emerged into open sunlight, blinking like a man stepping out of a gloomy jungle.

There he staggered to his feet and stopped. His eyes had lost their look of suspiciously angelic innocence. They were filled with caution and wonder, with guilt and pleasure. They gazed with a new unflickering intensity.

Before the child stretched a plantation of raspberries, row after row of green and red luxuriance. Seeing them, he had eyes for nothing else. He seemed for one moment paralysed by the crimson burden of the tall thick canes. At home, side by side with the potatoes, his mother also had a plantation of raspberries, ripe, thick and lovely as these.

To the child however the raspberries that his mother grew seemed suddenly despicable. Moreover she had forbidden him fearfully to touch them. The fruit before him was larger and more luscious than his mother's could ever be and as he caught all at once the strong fragrance of the fruit and leaves in the warm sun his mouth was tortured.

He plucked a raspberry. It melted swiftly in his mouth like snow. Once a great fish-net had covered the plantation, but the stakes had rotted away and the net had fallen into useless tangles among the canes. There was nothing to stop his progress into endless

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raspberry avenues. He walked at first furtively, stopping to listen, but the garden was silent and safe and deserted. Nothing but himself moved and presently he walked more boldly, rustling the leaves carelessly with his eager limbs.

All the time he ate. He ate as though in a race against time or light. At first he swallowed, one by one, berries that were like great crimson thimbles filled with blood. Tiring of their very magnificence he gathered smaller, sharper fruit and ate it by handfuls, tossing back his head and crimsoning his lips.

There came a moment when the taste of even the loveliest fruit seemed curiously dead. He paused and sighed heavily and licked his lips, drunk with fruit. It occurred to him to take off his hat.

He began to walk up and down the avenues, filling it. There was still no sound or movement in the garden except his own rustlings among the leaves. The juice of many raspberries began to stain the whiteness of his sun-hat. He did not notice it. He was drunk with forbidden bliss.

It happened suddenly that he came to the end of an avenue and there looked up. Beyond him stretched an open lawn, deserted and poppy-sown. He regarded it with the brazen indifference of reckless confidence. He plucked a raspberry and ate it with loud and careless smacking of his lips, as though to defy the last danger of the place.

He turned to pluck another and stopped. A pale

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object, like a menacing vision, had appeared over the raspberry canes behind him. It was a panama hat. He gazed at it for one second with giddy astonishment. It moved. His heart leapt. A second later the panama hat bore down upon him with noises of stentorian rage.

'By God, I'll skin you!'

The child fled. He darted down an avenue of canes with a wild terror in his heart, scratching himself and running blindly. All the time he was conscious of pursuit by the panama hat. He was terrorized by cries of rage and threats of annihilation. He stumbled and dropped his hat and dared not stay to pick it up again.

Out in the field he paused for an agonized moment to take breath. Behind him a roar of rage was hurled like a cannon-shot from among the raspberries. Glancing back he saw his white sun-hat picked up and brandished angrily. He fled with frightened speed across the field.

The voice of the man pursued him. He dared not glance back. He ran with unrelenting desperation until he could pause behind his mother's fence with security again. But even there he could not rest. He was trembling and exhausted. Finally however he took a long breath and with a great effort nonchalantly strolled through the potatoes and by the raspberries towards the house, trying to look angelically at the sky.

It happened that as he came from behind his

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mother's raspberry canes she herself emerged from the house. She was a wide, powerful woman, with arms like clubs and a black suspicious gaze.

Seeing her, he stopped. That pause was fatal. She swooped down upon him instantly. He remembered in that moment all the warnings she had given him about her raspberries. How many times had she not warned him that if he laid a finger on them she would flay him? She bore down on him as the panama hat had borne down on him in the other garden. He wriggled futilely to escape but this time there was no escape. He made frantic signs of innocence.

'I'll learn you!' she shouted.

'I didn't — I never!' he moaned.

'Look at your mouth!' she cried.

She seized him mercilessly. His guilt was so vivid on his lips that she belaboured him until her arm whipped up and down like a threshing-flail.

The child, as he howled his innocence of a crime he had never committed, dismally observed across the field an approaching figure.

It was signalling terrible threats with a white hat.

MILLENNIUM ALSO RAN

THE young reporter walked reluctantly out of the soft morning sunshine and up the half-dark iron-shod stairs which led to the office of his paper, *The Harlington Echo*. In strict truth the small bare draughty room behind the frosted-glass door at the head of the staircase was hardly an office; and he himself was scarcely a reporter. The room was in reality a disused lumber-room belonging to the wine-and-spirit merchant who occupied the premises below. It was not only bare and draughty but damp and mice-ridden, and except for two chairs placed against a small deal writing table and a waste-paper basket overflowing with torn and screwed-up papers by the fireplace there was no furniture. Back-numbers of the newspaper were strewn about the floor loosely or in dust-yellowed bundles tied up with packing string. A smell of mouldering paper and printing ink mingled with the vague odour of stale spirits or wine coming up from the warehouse below. Above all these was an odour of dust, old stale dust that showered mysteriously and everlastingly like yellowish pollen on the chairs and tables and papers. It had powdered the tea-cups standing on the iron mantelshef above the fireplace, and at times the young reporter seemed to feel it penetrating to his mind also.

poisoning and deadening it. He loved the place like a mortuary.

He arrived there a little after nine each morning. He was hardly a reporter because, except for odd cases of suicide and drunkenness, a weekly routine of weddings and funerals, births and birthday parties, there was nothing to report. The office was a branch only; he was there in readiness, an outpost who might any day be lucky enough to discover some scandalous or tragic human calamity. He came to the office every morning with the vague hope that during the night someone had shot his wife and burned the body. Without such tragedies he knew that his day, from nine o'clock in the morning to seven or eight at night, would be utterly filled with boredom, his mind soured by dust and silence and loneliness.

He threw up the window and put his hat on the mantelpiece. It was early June; he could hardly bear to look out of the window at the sunshine. He had bicycled in that morning from the country and he remembered almost with pain the odour of meadow-sweet, the singing of yellow-hammers, the hot strength of the sun.

Unfolding the morning paper he sat down at the table. His first job each morning was to cut the lists of race-horses from the sporting pages of a London newspaper and then paste them on a sheet of cardboard which hung by the telephone on the wall. Two doors along the street stood the offices of a rival newspaper.

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In the afternoon, in order to defeat the rival, the young reporter would receive the race-winners and their starting-prices by telephone and then stamp them frenziedly in violet letters with a rubber-stamp on the stop-press columns of the early editions and deal out the papers to the newsboys who stood crowding on the dark stairs, deriding him impatiently. Sometimes he won; but often he checked the horses wrongly or printed them upside down and then lost. By four o'clock each day he was sick and tired with the frenzied haste and uncertainty of it all and the fear that at any moment, Mathers, the senior journalist, might burst in half-drunk and storm at him.

He tore the paper-scissors from the table-drawer and then stopped. On the table lay a note for him, written on the back of an old ballot-paper in Mather's tipsy-looking, half-illegible handwriting.

'Go round to No. 7 Salvation Terrace,' it said, 'and inquire why Parker hasn't been and if he will be coming again.' And as a kind of postscript: 'Nose round a bit.'

Parker was a paper-seller, a thin sharp-nosed colourless-eyed youth of eighteen or nineteen, who had failed to appear for three days. Mathers must have written the note late the previous night. He came to the office rarely, making unexpected and volcanic appearances, generally in half-drunken haste and temper, a small, ferrety, bestial man, with shifty eyes that were raw pink from constant drinking and a short ginger moustache stained a dirty yellow nearest his thin lips.

Both in winter and summer he wore a greasy mackintosh, a dirty yellow woollen scarf and a grey shapeless tweed hat from under which his fair hair struggled down unkempt and tawdry. He would rush into the office, bringing a smell of liquor against which the stale odours of wine and spirits from below seemed sweet, and sitting down at the table, still in his hat and scarf and mackintosh, he would proceed to write with frenzied excitement, as though he had come straight from the scene of some fresh murder. As he wrote he turned constantly to spit heavily into the fireplace, muttering and swearing in savage undertones between the spits. Then he would jump up as volcanically and suddenly as he had come in, hurl some savage command or criticism at the young reporter, and clatter downstairs, leaving behind him the stench of his breath and the loathsome hiss of his spittle dropping into the fire. Yet there were times when he came in with a sort of lugubrious sobriety. On these occasions he would solemnly sit down and lecture the young reporter. He would talk on the beauty of obedience and integrity, on duty, on moral cleanliness, on life itself, speaking in a soft oily voice with the repellent smugness of a preacher sermonizing, his beery pink eyes contradicting both his words and his voice. The youth's finest emotions would revolt as he listened, turning to a sickness which rose up in his throat and soured and remained there. He often could not speak for revulsion and unhappiness as he heard the suave criticisms of his

conduct and work. He had come to the office in the belief that he might learn to write there. Mathers knew this and the youth's belief would serve as a sort of text for him.

'You want to learn to write, eh?' he would say. 'You want to cultivate style? Well, let me tell you, young man, that you won't cultivate a style by sitting on your backside waiting for something to happen. How do you suppose the great London journalists find the stories that fill their front pages? By sitting on their backsides, like you? Don't stare out of the window! Listen to me! Do you suppose I'm telling you this for the good of *my* soul? What the hell do you expect to learn by dreaming? You must get out! Go on, get out. Now. Find something to write about. Nose round a bit. And don't come back until you've found something.'

And so, this morning, he must go out and nose round a bit. He must forage among the blood and offal of human scandal and tragedy. The note seemed to mean that Mathers would not be in all day, and he finished cutting out and pasting the lists of race-horses at his leisure. While the paste was drying he read down the lists and then referred back to the paper for the tips given by the racing journalists.

There appeared to be a big race at three o'clock. He read the names of the horses half aloud: 'Irish Green, Sea Captain, White Rose, Moonraker, Volcano, Millennium, Double Quick, Black Tulip'. The tipsters

seemed to fancy Millennium, and one wrote: 'We have always known, of course, that he was an animal of sterling abilities as well as achievements, and I have no doubt that in to-day's race he will add further lustre to his name. One might say, indeed, that to-day, for once, the Millennium will arrive.'

When he had finished reading he hung up the card by the telephone, put some sheets of ballot-paper in his pocket, locked up the office and went downstairs into the sunshine.

He walked down the street, towards the sun, past the saw-dusted steps of the wine-and-spirit merchants and the offices of his rival newspaper. Before he could nose round a bit or inquire after Parker he must perform his morning ritual: he must see the police and the coroner. These were, so to speak, his incubators, from which he hoped every morning that exciting game like rape and murder and felony and suicide had hatched.

But on this morning, as on most others, nothing had happened. His 'Anything doing?' at the police-station was answered by the fat sergeant at the desk with a glance at the pile of charge-sheets, a shake of the head and a quick 'Have you 'eard this one?' He stopped to listen to the bawdy story and tried half-heartedly to join in with the sergeant's deep laughter, which went echoing in hollow waves of sound up and down the glazed-brick corridors leading to the cells.

From the police he went to the coroner. The town

was small, provincial in its very odours of fish and cheap drapery. The awnings were already down over the shop-fronts. He felt with pleasure the hot sun on his neck.

He pushed open the swing-door of the dark gauze-windowed coroner's office and repeated to the youth sitting inside on a high round stool at a desk his daily formula:

'Anything doing?'

'Nothing.'

'Which is the way to Salvation Street?' he asked.

The youth put his pen behind his ear and came to the door and gave the reporter directions.

'Go through the churchyard and then past the canal. It's the fourth street by the canal. Anybody will tell you.'

He walked through the churchyard. It was nearly eleven. A bed of white pinks growing over an old grave poured out a heavenly fragrance as he passed.

He passed through the shopping streets and the sloping alleys, like rabbit-runs, going down to the river. He smelled the morning smells of fish and drapery and watered dust changing to the odours of the canal-streets.

He read the name of the streets by the canal, each a cul-de-sac: Lord Street, Jubilee Terrace, Charlotte's Row, Salvation Street. The houses, squat boxes of dirty yellow brick and grey slate, had an entry to each pair, like kennels, and the railway ran side by side with the canal, bridging the streets.

He walked up Salvation Street and knocked at the door of No. 7, and after an interval and a second knock he heard footsteps and a wriggling of the unused key in the dry lock.

The door opened a crack. An old woman showed her face, looking very white and startled at seeing him there.

'Can I have a word with Mr. Parker?' he said. 'I'm from the *Echo*.'

He saw tears begin to roll down her cheeks almost before he had formed the words, and as she cried she shook her head feebly, making her tears tumble and fall quickly down over her black blouse.

He tried to say something to her and excuse himself, but as suddenly as she had begun to cry she disappeared.

Waiting, he saw through the door-crack the room within: a broken couch heaped with rags and old shoes, the bare floor-boards foot-worn and broken, the holes nailed over here and there with the lids of sugar-boxes and odd scraps of colourless linoleum; the wall-paper ripped and damp-rotten, the largest gaps pasted over with sheets of his own paper, *The Harlington Echo*.

He was thinking of walking away when he heard the return of footsteps, and expecting to see the old woman again, he got ready to say that he had made a mistake, but the door was opened wider and he stood face to face with a young girl. She would be somewhere between seventeen or eighteen. She was in black.

'Can I speak to Mr. Parker?' he said.

The cruel and foolish futility of his words struck him before he had finished speaking and he knew what her reply would be.

'He died yesterday,' she said, but he could hardly catch her words.

Confused and angry with himself, he looked straight at the girl's face in mute humility. She seemed to understand. Her face, narrow, bleak and very girlish, had a strange composure about it; she had gone beyond grief and even beyond resignation into a kind of stupidity, a sort of elevated, unemotional trance. Her eyes were dark and dry, without even the light of grief or pain, her hands hanging loosely at her side, her fingers straight and outspread, her wedding-ring gleaming bright against their pale boniness. He felt that she had said all she wished or could say. And as he wondered what to say before he took leave of her he heard the cracked sobbing of the old woman and her voice speaking from the room between the sobs.

'Ask him if he'll put it in the paper.' Her tear-wet face appeared behind the girl's. 'Will you put it in the paper, eh? It was gallopin'. He was only bad three days. It'd make him that happy if you'd put it in the paper. God bless you if you'll put it in the paper.' And then:

'Would you like to have a look at him? He looks so lovely. You can come and look at him.'

All the time the old woman was speaking, the girl's

face was changing and hardening into a consciousness of bitterness and pain. Her eyes awoke and became filled with an icy white light of hatred for the old woman and her garrulous sobbing. The old woman tried to open the door wide enough for him to enter but the girl held it, clenching it with her white hand and jamming her foot against it.

'I must go if I'm to get it into the paper,' said the reporter.

'Come and look at him,' moaned the old woman. 'He looks lovely. You wouldn't think he was dead.'

But encouraged by the bitterness in the girl's eyes, he ignored the old woman.

'Is there anything I can do?' he said to the girl.

She shook her head.

'I'll put it in the paper, if you like.'

She shook her head again.

'Oh! have it put in,' moaned the old woman. 'It'd make me happy if you put it in.'

The girl was shaking her head and biting her lips vehemently.

'There may be some money to come from the paper,' said the reporter.

'I don't want the money!' the girl cried.

'Oh! you silly silly!' moaned the old woman. 'Oh! she don't know what she's saying. She's all upset. Don't take no notice of her. She ain't got a penny — not a penny I tell yer. We ain't got enough to pay for a decent coffin for him. Don't listen to her.'

'If there's any money I'll send it,' he said, half-walking away.

'Oh! she'll be glad of every halfpenny!'

'Oh! be quiet! Be quiet!' shouted the girl.

As she shouted the words she pushed the old woman furiously behind her with one hand and slammed the door shut with the other. Before moving away he heard her cries echoing distractedly in the house, mingling with the weary complaint of the old woman trying to comfort her. A woman with a wet-patched sack-apron over her black skirt and a man's cap hat-pinned to her thin grey hair hurried past him as he walked down the street, wiping her soapy hands on her apron and her sharp nose on her hand. He heard her voice also mingled with the voices in the house where the dead youth lay:

'Anything I can do, my gal? Mrs. Parker, anything I can do?'

Finally he could hear no more. He walked under the railway bridge, along the canal and so back to the town. Should he put it in the paper? The scene hurt and depressed him, persisting vividly in his mind. Ought he to put it in? Wasn't this where he became a reporter? Half against himself he strung the phrases of a paragraph tentatively together. 'After an illness of only three days, James Parker, 19, yesterday succumbed to . . . Deceased, who had for some time acted in the capacity of newsman to this office, leaves a wife and . . .' The trite easy phrases condemned

themselves and seemed to reproach him. He began to think that instead he would write an article, an impassioned account of the filthy house, the garrulous old woman, the tragic young wife. He would describe it all with vivid indignation and emotion, asking rhetorically if this were civilization, if poverty were any less a crime because it was also a tragedy? In imagination he saw the article, with impassioned headlines, given a prominent place in the paper, and he half-imagined an editorial comment upon it: 'We draw the attention of our readers to the report, given on another page, of what we feel is not only a sad and distressing case but an indictment of the social conditions under which we live and for which, in a sense, we are also responsible.' His mind hammered out the words angrily. He would write a report that would stir the consciousness of all who read it. His desire to write flamed up so powerfully that he found himself walking along in an agitation of rage and anxiety.

Back at the office he sat down and took up some sheets of ballot-paper and began to write. He was ashamed when the old easy phrases began to form themselves and not the passionate words of righteous accusation he had planned. 'After an illness of only three days' duration . . .' He began to tear up the sheets, trying fresh beginnings. 'Housed in a jerry-built hovel on the banks of a canal which stinks in summer and floods in winter, I to-day found Mrs. Parker . . .' He knew that this was too strong and

he tore up the sheet, beginning again and again. At last he desisted and went downstairs and across the road to the eating-house opposite, bringing back the cup of tea which he allowed himself every day with his sandwiches.

He drank and ate a little and then, feeling calmer, began to write again. He succeeded in describing the street, the house and the conditions under which he had found the girl and the old woman living. Then, warming up to his subject, he covered several pages, eating and drinking as he wrote, his sense of time deadened.

But coming to the girl herself, he could not go on. He saw clearly enough her dumb negation, her look of unemotional immobility, and he could hear with painful clarity her voice crying reproachfully, 'I don't want the money! Be quiet! Be quiet!' but he could not put the words describing it on paper. He could not convey the sense of her grief, her youth, her unspoken bitterness. And he went on watching her face, as it were, in his mind, without being able to describe it, until he heard clumsy feet on the stairs below and the sound of the newsmen's voices talking about the afternoon's races.

He was surprised to find that it was nearly three o'clock. He put his written sheets aside and opened the table-drawer and took out the rubber-stamping apparatus in readiness for stop-pressing the results.

Heavy feet came up the stairs as he was doing so

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and the glass door opened. A bundle of newspapers was flung on the floor inside and a dirty-capped head appeared in the door crack and a hoarse news-voice whispered:

‘Remember what I told yer?’

‘No.’

‘What? Didn’t I tell yer it was a gift — Millennium? Ah! yer don’t know a good thing when I give yer one. It *can’t* lose — unless it falls over. If that ain’t a winner I don’t know a mare from a cock-sparrow.’

Suddenly something occurred to the reporter:

‘Is it too late now?’ he said.

‘Well, you don’t hurt. What d’ye want on? Put your top-hat on?’

It had occurred to the reporter that he might back Millennium, using Parker’s money and giving the winnings to his widow. If the horse lost he himself would stand the loss; and hastily he found the sales-book, checked the sales to Parker, and a moment later the newsman was clattering downstairs with five shillings for the bet.

The reporter sat back in his chair to wait for the telephone call. As he sat there he played idly with the rubber-stamp and its letters, setting up Millennium and printing it on the blotting-paper. In imagination he saw the girl’s face as it would be if the horse won, contrasting it with the grief-stupid tragic mask he could recall so perfectly but could not describe. And suddenly he remembered also the vehement shaking

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of her head in reply to his 'I'll put it in the paper if you like', and he suddenly seized the sheets he had written with so much struggle and tore them up.

His heart leapt as the telephone rang. As he stood with the receiver to his ear, waiting, he could hear the hush of the news-boys as they listened on the stairs.

A voice on the telephone gave him the horses. He wrote them down before the consciousness of his failure struck him:

'Volcano, Double Quick, White Rose.'

He repeated them and put up the receiver. A moment later the newsboys were crowding at the door, he was setting up the type in the rubber-stamp and stamping the horses' names in violet letters in the stop-press columns. Voices clamoured and swore and urged him to hurry. He stamped frenziedly and dealt out the papers. Excited feet clattered noisily on the iron-rimmed stairs. 'What won? Volcano. Millennium also ran. Volcano won. Millennium also ran.' Little by little the voices faded away downstairs.

When the last of the papers had been stamped and dealt out he sat alone. The voices crying the papers came up from the streets outside, rising and falling, shrill and inarticulate. He had never been able to tell what they said. Now though he listened carefully their words still eluded him. And he sat there long after they had died away, the memory of their inarticulate sound persisting in his mind like the clamour of voices crying to be understood.

SALLY GO ROUND THE MOON

I

PHOEBE BONNER stood watching the sunset over the roofs of London. She was frying a kipper over the gas-ring in one of the two rooms which the Bonners rented at the top story of Pope's Buildings, and though her eyes were fixed on the sunset her mind was far away. She was thinking of the country and the kind of sunset she had grown up to see there. The sunsets in London were mere obscure reflections of the lovely sunsets in the country, brilliant crimson seas of light and waves of phosphorescent gold and clouds of purple riding behind black pine trees.

She turned the kipper with a fork; the fat hissed and a rank odour filled the room. She was fifteen, a thin straight-haired girl with bright black eyes; her clothes were very tight and her body, having no room in them, pushed herself into sudden curves or angles, giving her an appearance of gawkiness. She had come to London from the country to look after her sister's children and to tidy and scrub the two rooms while her sister and her aunt went out to work. Her sister worked in a restaurant from eight in the morning till eight at night. Her aunt was a rag-woman. One corner of the room was piled up with the rags she had

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bought and could not sell. Sometimes, when alone, Phoebe turned them over; they stank uncleanly, the discarded clothes of a vast humanity, clothes in which people had worked and loved and had even died, and the living-room was poisoned with a half-sour, half-musty odour that even the smell of the kipper could not destroy.

The girl felt unutterably lonely. When the children had gone to school and her aunt and sister had gone to work no one ever troubled to climb to the top of Pope's Buildings, though she heard people moving about on the floor below, the whiz and treadling of a sewing-machine and the sound of angry voices. A tailor and his wife lived there and whenever the tailor's wife came in drunk he beat her unmercifully. She in turn cried and swore and he banged her about until she could not stand. But there were days when she was quiet and sober and they sewed and pressed in silence, and the world of Pope's Buildings on those days seemed vast and empty.

She turned the kipper again and looked at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was a little after four o'clock. The sun was vanishing rapidly and the golden light was fading. She spread the cloth and laid cups and a teapot on the deal table. In a few moments Christopher would be home.

Christopher was her sister's husband and it was for him that she was frying the kipper. He came home and ate his tea with the children and herself, and she

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often ran downstairs and along to the fishmonger's at the corner and bought a kipper or some shrimps for his tea, giving both herself and him great pleasure.

Five minutes later, when she heard him ascending the stairs, she knew by the sound on the bare wooden stairs who was coming up: her aunt lumbered and paused continually for breath, her sister ran quickly and in jerks, the tailor's wife climbed laboriously one by one, swearing to herself. She knew her sister's husband because of the absolute weariness of his step. He climbed like a man whose strength and courage were fading away.

She could hear his loud breathing as he climbed the last few stairs and when he came in his lips were hanging apart and he was breathing harshly through his mouth.

He came in and took off his black felt hat and sat down.

'Oh! dear,' he said.

He shut his eyes. His voice, his eyes and the way he rubbed his hand across his forehead all had the same weariness as his feet climbing the stairs.

'I'm sure you walk too far,' said the girl.

'I haven't walked at all I'm sure,' he protested. .

'Come now — the tea's ready,' she said. 'I've been and got you a kipper.'

He shook his head.

'I couldn't eat it,' he said. 'I'm sorry,' he went on, opening his eyes, 'but I couldn't eat it.'

'Oh! I got it for you.'

He turned his head and looked at the kipper lying in the fat of the frying pan and he wanted to be sick.

'I'll try in a moment,' he said. 'When I've had a cup of tea.'

He sat up to the table and put down the book he was carrying, a book called *The Meaning of God*. He was a thin white-faced man, quite young, with sparse brown hair which was falling out at his temples, and vague blue eyes, and as he sat at the table his body trembled, and his face looked as though he had been frightened and shocked by an explosion and he would never recover his calmness again. His hands were fine and white and his lips almost feminine in their gentleness.

He drank some tea, and sat silent, and as he drank the girl looked at him.

'Any luck?' she asked.

He smiled quietly and shook his head. He had been trying to sell the book called *The Meaning of God*. He was studying divinity but having no money with which to take proper courses he was trying to study by himself. He studied in the public libraries and with books that he was able to borrow. A paper sometimes gave him books to review, books like *The Meaning of God*, and when he had written the review, often working himself sick over it by his conscientiousness, he tried to sell the book and buy another with the money. The books were hard to sell, however. No one, it

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seemed, had any use for books on God, which were so soon stale and obsolete, and no thought on God seemed to keep its truth for long. The bookshops were full of books on God which would never be read again.

Staring at him, the girl wondered what he did with himself all day, what he ate and what he thought.

‘Do have the kipper?’ she said.

He did not want the kipper but for some reason or other he said ‘Yes’ and he knew a moment later that he said it because he did not wish to disappoint her.

It was Friday and the children were staying late at school for a concert and would not be home till five. As Christopher tried to eat the kipper Phoebe talked to him. They often talked together; they talked of each other’s lives, and one day he told her why he had married Ada, her sister.

‘When I first came to London I used to go to that tea-shop and have my lunch. I always sat at the same table and Ada always served me and somehow we drifted into it.’

He could not explain it any differently. Day after day he had gone to the restaurant and had sat at the same table and nothing had happened. He ordered very little to eat and generally he read a book while he ate, and somehow he got into the habit of ordering the same thing day after day, because it was less trouble and because in that way he could manage his money better. He did not notice the waitress much until one day she said: ‘I don’t think it’s good for you.’ He

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looked up astonished, 'What isn't?' he said. 'Eating the same thing day after day; why don't you let me bring you something else?' Seeing the sense of it he acquiesced and she brought him some fish instead of his bread and stew, and for the first time he took notice of her. She was dark and sharp-featured, and her skin, even though she powdered it, had an anaemic pallor that was almost transparent. In a day or two she not only brought him another change of food but a larger helping and she begged him not to leave her a tip any longer. She was not strikingly attractive but she touched him by her solicitude, and one day, feeling unspeakably lonely and having not a soul to talk to, he said: 'Do you mind if I wait for you this evening?' When she came out of the restaurant in the evening she said, 'Well, where are we going?' He simply shook his head and said, 'Where you like. I don't know. Let's walk somewhere,' and they walked along the Embankment, talking trivially, and then back through the streets towards Lincoln's Inn. It began to rain and they stood in a passage-way for shelter. The passage was narrow and a cat brushed by Ada's feet and she pressed herself close to Christopher. He had never loved a woman and he had no intention of loving Ada, but as he felt her close to him all kinds of sensations which he could not explain surged up in him. His throat felt tight, his blood throbbed hotly, his loneliness vanished and finally he put his arms about Ada and she kissed his awkward lips. 'I suppose you're out for

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all you can get,' she said. 'Like all the rest.' She touched his body, and she leaned with all her weight against him. It was utterly dark and London was silent except for a distant murmur of traffic. 'All right,' she said. He had asked for nothing, but she said 'All right' as though she were surrendering herself to his desperate entreaty.

Afterwards he saw her again, and one evening when it snowed and he had no money for a theatre she asked him to go home with her.

He remembered boarding a tram with her and travelling into that part of London beyond Rosebery Avenue. It was Saturday evening, the tram was full of half-drunken cockney women, and the lurching of the tram and the smell of gin made him sick.

When he first saw Pope's Buildings in the darkness it looked to him a great black rectangle with a courtyard fenced off by iron railings, exactly like a prison. He remembered mounting the stairs, following Ada's dark form and the trail of her scent upwards and upwards until he panted and began to breathe through his mouth. He caught the stench of stale rags even before she opened the door and from that moment he wished himself dead, his stomach revolting at the two big rooms, the foul rags, and the old woman with her yellowing teeth and thick lips and foreign-looking face, who sat sorting them. There was a single comforting object in the room, a large brown teapot bearing in white letters the words 'God Bless our

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Home', and whenever he felt sick or depressed he looked at the teapot and felt better.

When Ada asked him to go home with her a second time he made a desperate excuse and refused, feeling that he could endure hunger and bad food and loneliness but not the Bonners' two rooms and the stench of rags, but one evening a bitter wind, driving icy rain and sleet, came up from the mouth of the Thames and he felt every lash of it pierce through his coat to his bones as he waited for Ada to come out of the restaurant. He wanted to refuse to go to Pope's Buildings, but Ada was tired and when she said 'Come on; we've got a fire at least, whatever else we haven't got,' he consented.

The blackness of Pope's Buildings seemed worse than ever. It loomed above them like a monstrosity. Who could have built such a place? he wondered, and he felt that only a monster could have conceived and built it so like a prison.

But inside, perhaps because he had exaggerated his horror of it, the Bonners' two rooms seemed less terrible. The old woman was not at home. A bright fire was burning and he warmed his frozen hands and Ada made him some cocoa and the pile of rags smelt less rankly than before. He drank his cocoa slowly and felt tolerably happy.

The old woman came home, a little tipsy, about eleven o'clock. Her black hat and coat were sprinkled with frozen sleet.

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'Awful night, awful, downright awful,' she muttered. 'Christ!'

Christopher winced at the blasphemy. He could not bear to hear the name of Christ spoken with derision.

'You'd better stay here for to-night,' said Ada to him.

'Oh! no, no, no,' he protested.

Later Ada went out and looked at the night and when she came back she was shivering violently.

'You're not going out in this,' she said. 'You can't! It's a blizzard.'

She did not heed his protests and she went into the second room and banged the pillows about and flapped the sheets.

'Course you'll stay,' said the old woman. 'Course you'll stay. Lor' lummy.'

He resigned himself and later he undressed quickly and knelt by the bed and said his prayers and then crept into bed and thought of God. Sometimes he suffered from insomnia, and the quiet thought of God often sent him to sleep. 'God is a spirit,' he repeated to himself, 'And they that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth.' What quiet words and how beautiful! He stared at the cracked ceiling and forgot the dirty room and the rags and the old woman, and then shut his eyes.

He was aroused by the presence of someone against the bed. He stirred himself. It was Ada, getting into bed with him. He touched her nightgown and her

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thin breasts as she came beside him, his mind too drowsy for speech. In the morning he woke and saw her standing half-dressed, by the window, gaping. Her cheap green drawers and her little green corset that pushed her breasts into a false prominence and her white legs, covered with little unhealthy blue veins, all made her look frowzy and cheap and vulgar. She drew on her stockings and slipped on her skirt and powdered her face. She did not wash herself and from that moment he felt that he hated her. He could not think why he had endured her so long or even why he had endured her at all.

Now it was no use wondering. He ate Phoebe's kipper with the same nausea as he had once felt for Ada. To-morrow it would not matter. He was married to Ada and had already two children by her and probably, she told him, there would be another.

He drank his tea and Phoebe poured out another cup. He had been silent for some moments, thinking.

'You're so quiet,' she said. 'I'm sure you worry too much.'

'What should I worry about?'

'Are you lonely?' she said all at once.

'I suppose I am,' he confessed.

There was a quietness about her words, and her way of speaking that made him make the confession.

'Did you see the sunset?' said the girl.

'I'm afraid I didn't notice it.'

She told him about the sunset and then about the

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sunsets in the village at home, and as she spoke a queer wistful look of entrancement came into his face. And while he caught the beauty of the country in winter and of the green and golden clouds floating at sunset behind the pines, he caught also the faint unhappiness of the girl's voice. She wanted to go back; she hated London. His heart ached for her, because he knew perfectly the feeling of her loneliness.

Later his two children came in, two girls of five and six. Their voices were shrill and they sent pains screeching through his head. In moments of extreme nervousness or distraction his head became a machine in which there was a cog-wheel that whistled and whined and grated louder than all the rest. The cog-wheel was immovable; like some diabolical invention it was fixed so that its jagged teeth could just touch his brain. Gradually, he felt, it would wear away his brain or irreparably damage it.

He was glad when the children had gone to bed. The children with Phoebe and the old woman, slept in the second room. Ada and himself slept on a single bed which was collapsible but which nearly always remained during the day just as they had slept in it, the sheets and blankets still tumbled and frowzy. People sat on the bed to tie up their boots and the chamber stood on the floor beneath it, unemptied. He hated this bed. Once he had hated the old woman's rags, but the rags were at least movable. They changed and were sold, but the bed never changed. It remained

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fixed and absolute: it was the expression of all that was foul and terrible in his life, the things from which he could not escape, sordidness and vulgarity and littleness. The bed was so terrible to him that he had never yet knelt by it to pray. He prayed only when Ada had fallen asleep, or he prayed in the public libraries, in their strict silence, or he sat under the plane trees in Lincoln's Inn, and watched the pigeons and prayed there.

When the children had gone to bed he sat down at the bare deal table and put on his spectacles and began to mend his watches. He had started life as an apprentice to a watchmaker. The old woman bought up lots of second-hand and broken watches and he repaired them and she sold them again. Sometimes the tailor from below came up with his watch. 'It's like my old woman,' he said. 'It won't go until its insides is oiled.' Like this he earned a shilling or two and he could keep up his head with the knowledge that he was not utterly useless.

Phoebe sat looking at him as he dismantled a watch and laid out the works on a newspaper.

He was working on a little silver-and-blue lady's watch which needed cleaning. The old woman had bought it in a rag-market. He laid out the tiny sparkling wheels and cylinders and screws and one by one cleaned them scrupulously. It was the kind of work his hands were meant for, the work they did well. He no longer looked weak and irresolute and useless.

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He took in the dignity of work, his hands moving with certainty and grace.

Phoebe sat watching, absorbed and amazed. 'How do you ever get it right again?' she said.

'Oh! it'll come right,' he said. It was the only thing in his life of which he felt certain.

One of the children woke in the next room and cried for a drink of water. The tap was out on the landing and while she drew the water the girl heard the old woman lumbering upstairs. There were nearly a hundred steps and she paused for breath every five steps or so.

A few minutes later she came in. She was very fat; her bosom and her stomach joined in a great ballooning bulge and her hips were loose and dissolute. She threw down a great bundle of rags on the floor and began coughing and spitting. 'Christ Jesus!' she muttered. And suddenly she roared at Christopher:

'You might come down and give us a bloomin' 'and, you might! Yes, you! 'Ang abaht all day and don't do nuthin'! Why the 'ell don't you come an' 'elp a poor ole gal? Christ. You're a one you are. You beat me.'

She heaved the rags aside and sat down. Christopher tried to take no notice of her outburst but his hand trembled and he dropped a watch-screw.

'Ada ain't comin' straight 'ome,' said the old woman. 'I ran against her in 'Olborn.'

'Why isn't she coming home?' said Christopher.

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'Ow the 'ell do I know? She's off up west somewhere. The gal wants to enjoy 'erself once in a while don't she? Lor' lummy. I should say so.'

Christopher said nothing but the works of the watch seemed to tremble before his eyes. Phoebe came in from the other room.

'I'd better get your supper, hadn't I?' she said to the old woman.

'Give me a drop o' whisky, that's all I want, then I'm off again meself.'

The whisky was kept in the cupboard by the fireplace. The girl stood in a wicker-bottom chair and reached the bottle and a glass. Stepping off the chair, she slipped and the glass flew out of her hands, smashing against the fender.

The old woman suddenly sprang up and flew at the girl and dealt her a blow across the face that sent her staggering.

'God 'elp us, what the devil's the matter with you?' she screeched. She advanced on the girl and lifted her arm menacingly. 'You stuck-up bitch, you might 'elp your old aunt up with her bundle. But you won't will you, not if you can 'elp it? Not you, my lady. 'Ere, let me get my whisky before I does summat desperate. You make me sick!'

The agility and strength of her fat body was amazing as she climbed into the chair and found another glass and poured out her whisky.

'And after to-day,' she roared at the girl, 'you come

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to the market and meet me. I don't keep you for nothing.'

She drank the whisky, coughed and went out of the door. As she went down the stairs, she swore aloud to herself.

Christopher stood up. The girl was crying quietly.

He felt that he knew exactly how she felt, that she must cry and go on crying until the very spending of tears brought her comfort.

Helpless, he went on mending the watch, feeling wretched, and he rejoiced when the girl ceased sobbing and came and sat by the fire.

'You'll forget it in the morning,' he said to her.

She shook her head, certain in her misery that she would never forget.

An inspiration came to him and he jumped up and searched in his trunk under the bed and found his Bible. Without warning her, he opened it at random and began to read.

'For my thoughts,' he read, 'are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: so shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish

that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it. For ye shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you in singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.'

Before he could read any further she began to cry again.

He shut his Bible and put his arm about her shoulder, which shook violently as she sobbed, feeling in every tremor of her body the misery of her loneliness. 'I want to go back home,' she managed to say. 'I can't stand it any longer. I hate it.'

He had brought out his Bible with the intention of talking to her about God and the importance of Belief in times of trouble and weariness, but now he knew that his words would be superfluous and that God would complicate it all. She was unhappy and lonely and she wanted to go back to the country again. Nothing could be clearer than that.

She lived in Rutland, a lovely miniature county, like a park. There were green hills that undulated gently among great woods and old stone farms, churches with graceful spires and great country mansions half-hidden by stately trees. Spring was coming and the blossom in the orchards would be tossed like white foam in the wind, the primroses would run across under the half-bare trees like a yellow flame. She had only to think of it to bring about a sensation of fresh misery and joy.

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'Where is your bag?' he said. 'If you'll get your things ready I'll take you to the station on Sunday morning before Ada and your aunt are up. I'll manage it somehow.'

She looked at him thankfully, her eyes brilliant with the film of tears, and suddenly she put her lips on his, lightly and with girlish tenderness, and then drew away and smiled. Her lips were soft and smooth and they reminded him of tulip petals and her kiss had a kind of devout thankfulness even its brief lightness. He smiled awkwardly, hardly knowing what to do, and went on mending the watch.

II

In the morning Christopher walked about London, trying to sell *The Meaning of God* again. The day was raw and cold and a north-east wind seemed to be in wait behind corners and in alley-ways and then leap out at him and slash him icily. Sometimes instead of selling he tried to exchange the book, but he was unsuccessful. The author of the book was obscure and again no one seemed interested in God.

About noon he came back to Lincoln's Inn and sat down on a seat and rested for a moment, and then went on to see another bookseller. There was a bookshop off Theobald's Road owned by a German named Karl whom he knew slightly. His shop was like a rabbit-

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hutch, but in it were stacked thousands of volumes and there at all times of the day all kinds of people gathered, poets and revolutionists, painters and actors, novelists and critics, crowding in the doorway and in the passage-way and leaning against the shelves of books inside the shop. They dressed fantastically or shabbily, with scarlet neckties and old tweed coats and emerald shirts; the less artistic they were the more fantastically they dressed, the lesser poets making no mistake about the poetic flavour of their dress. The poets and artists who were really poets and artists looked like ordinary men, clerks or shop-assistants or insurance agents. They behaved quietly. The lesser poets argued and raved, sneering at the successful and talking like prophets.

Christopher walked along the street, facing the wind and wondering if he would sell the book at the shop. Karl had no use for books on God, but often he bought for kindness' sake books which he despised and which he knew he would never sell. With the money Christopher could buy a dinner. That morning he had been forced to ask Ada for a little money and there had been an argument. 'Do you think I earn enough to keep you as well?' Ada had shouted. 'What about you keeping me for a change?' The old woman had joined in, her fat face quivering with indignation. 'You're a bloody fine 'usband, you are!' she told him. 'Why the bleeding 'ell don't you do something?'

He felt ashamed and humiliated. How could he

explain to them that he was trying to do something? It was no use explaining. They thought him superfluous and useless and nothing could alter that. Perhaps he really was superfluous and useless? he thought wretchedly. If only he could sell the book he might feel that he had done something, however small, to justify himself.

He came to the bookshop and stood outside for a moment turning over the odd volumes and the old art-magazines displayed on the trays. Suddenly his heart stood still. Among the shilling volumes was a copy of *The Meaning of God*, still in its paper wrapper. He tried to go on turning over the volumes as though nothing had happened, but his hand trembled. Lifting the cover of an art magazine he let the pages flicker slowly from under his thumb. Suddenly he caught sight of a reproduction of Ingres' 'La Source'. A feeling of extraordinary restfulness came over him and he thought instantly of Phoebe. The loveliness of the young girl in the painting, the profound light and shyness of her large dark eyes, the sublime purity of her nakedness were all more beautiful than ever Phoebe could hope to be, but he saw in both faces the same eternal longing of youth for something it could not name, its mystery, the blissful ache of its melancholy and its happiness. Forgetting the book he had come to sell, he stood thinking of Phoebe, remembering that she had kissed him.

A moment later Karl suddenly rushed out of the

shop with a pile of books which he set down on the open magazine.

'Good morning,' said Christopher.

'Is it a good-morning?' said Karl. He ran back into the shop rubbing his cold hands, for another pile of books.

Christopher followed him into the shop. There was no chance of his selling the book, but he would go in and look at the books and warm his hands by the bookseller's stove.

Karl was in a great hurry, setting out the last of his books for the day. He raced backwards and forwards, in and out of the shop, with immense energy. He was a tall powerfully built man, very dark, with a face of great strength and striking sensitiveness. He often boasted that he lived on nothing but his books and had no time to eat, feeding his body when it needed feeding. Once a day or once a week, it did not matter. Just as he had no time to eat he also had no time to rest. Something within him had been wound up, as in a clockwork doll, and would not run down. He had time and strength for every kind of person and every task. Obscure young poets brought him their first verses, which he printed, though he often despised them and always lost money on them. He gave away the books that he liked and sold only the books that he detested, having no creed but generosity — a wonderful eccentric generosity, full of warmth and administered with blasphemy and sometimes with the blindness of pure affection.

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When Christopher went into the shop two other men were inside, talking loudly. George, an elderly man with a heavy grey face and grey hair, was talking to a little cockney with a cherubic face, named Albert. George was deaf and Albert was shouting at him with a piercing cockney voice.

'Ow's yer wife?' shouted Albert.

'I haven't read it,' said George, shaking his head.

'I said 'ow's yer wife?'

'I haven't read it, I said.'

'Gawd!' said Albert. 'I said, 'ow's your wife?'

'Eh?'

'Ow's your wife, I said!' shouted Albert.

Karl came running in. Going straight to George he said quietly, 'He wants to know how your wife is,' and George answered at once:

'Oh! yes, yes, she's fine.'

Karl hurried out with a pile of books and Albert went on:

'Bring her round some evening.'

'Eh!' said George.

'Bring her round some evening!'

'I liked it. Did you?'

'Gawd!' said Albert. 'I asked you to bring her round some evening!'

'Who?'

'Your wife!'

'What about her?'

'Jesus wept,' said Albert. 'And well he might!'

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Bring her round . . .’ he began to shout. ‘Bring her round. . . .’

Christopher could endure it no longer. He walked out of the door. He stood for a moment looking at the books in the window. Karl vanished into the shop, taking no notice of him. Christopher wanted to ask him as a special favour if he would buy *The Meaning of God*, but first his pride and then the fear of refusal prevented him. Turning over the pages of the art-magazine he gazed at ‘La Source’, thinking once more of Phoebe. Suddenly he went impulsively into the shop with the magazine in his hand.

‘Will you exchange this book for this magazine?’ he said to Karl.

Karl took the book.

‘*The Meaning of God?*’ he said, faintly derisive. ‘What is the meaning of God?’

‘Take it, take it, please,’ urged Christopher.

‘I don’t want the bloody thing!’

‘Oh! don’t you? Can’t you just for this time?’ he pleaded.

Karl’s generosity triumphed.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘I’ve got *The Meaning of God* all over the place now but I’ll take it.’

‘Thank you,’ said Christopher. ‘Thank you so much.’

As he turned to go out of the shop, carrying the magazine under his arm, Albert was shouting to George:

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'Jesus Christ! I said bring your wife round some evening!'

Christopher hurried away out of reach of the voice. There was a curious feeling of exultation in his heart and he walked quickly. What was coming over him? Crossing the street he went through a passage into Lincoln's Inn, his favourite spot in all London, and sat down and gazed at 'La Source' again. Tears came into his eyes suddenly because of the great beauty of the picture. He felt ridiculously happy as he looked at the dark brimming eyes of the young girl, her beautiful breasts, the heavenly whiteness of her skin. The only woman he had ever seen undressed was Ada; her limbs were hard and her skin yellowish and her breasts had never blossomed, even for her children, and they too were hard and yellow. She only nauseated him. He had no desire to see Phoebe's body, content to feel in his imagination that she was like the young girl in 'La Source'.

Great clouds were flocking over from the sea, like immense grey geese flying southward, and suddenly he shut the book and gazed at them, gazing in a state of dreamy stupidity, not knowing what to do with happiness now that it had come to him.

Presently, too excited to sit still any longer, he got up and wandered down to the Embankment and walked along by the river. The water was chopped to small fierce waves by the wind; the smoke from tugs was snatched up and torn to shreds; gulls planed and

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swooped and breasted the grey waves, screaming mournfully. Young girls came hurrying along the pavement under the plane trees, leaving shops and offices. Trams lurched along and stopped and people clambered aboard and were wafted away. Over the Port of London itself a young moon rode along pale and transparent, appearing and vanishing again, whenever the clouds broke, like a far-off seagull lost among the geese of the clouds.

He stopped at a coffee-stall and bought himself a cup of tea and some biscuits. The stall-tender was a big fat man, in his shirt sleeves. A third man in dungarees came up and bought himself a sandwich and a cup of coffee. It was warm under the flap of the stall, with a smell of coffee and new meat pies, and the two men talked about the Government. 'There ain't enough work to go round — not if you argue till Doomsday. It'll never come right again.'

Christopher wanted to shout at them exultantly.

'What do I care about government? What does it matter? All my life I've never done anything better than mend watches and review books that nobody reads, and now I'm going to do something that is worth doing.'

He walked on again. The young girls hurrying away out of London all seemed like Phoebe. He looked at them wistfully and now and then he stopped and leaned on the stone parapet by the river and looked at 'La Source' again, thinking in the morning he was to

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take her to the station. She was to be snatched from his life. Her father, a big labouring man, had married a second time and there were eight other children, and probably he would belt her for going home, but he would keep her there simply because he could not raise the train-fare to send her back again.

He walked about till evening and then as darkness was falling he went back to Pope's Buildings.

He sat down as on the previous day and had tea with Phoebe and the children.

'Any luck?' she asked.

'Yes, I sold it,' he lied.

'Oh! I am glad.'

When the children had gone to bed Phoebe found her bag and together they packed her belongings. 'Oh! I shan't sleep,' she said. 'I know I shan't.' He took the bag downstairs and left it with the caretaker, who had a room on the ground floor. They could call for it as they passed in the morning.

When he came back Phoebe was turning over the pages of the art-magazine, which he had thrown in a chair, and as he shut the door she came upon the picture of 'La Source'. She stared at it, confused and embarrassed. Before she could shut the book he asked:

'Do you like that?'

'Oh! I don't know,' she said.

'I think it's very wonderful,' he said.

'It's just a girl.'

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'That's not all,' he said. 'It's the significance of it — the meaning.'

'Why she is spilling the water?'

He tried to explain it.

'That's the whole meaning of it — the spring of life. She's overflowing with youth and life. She's careless — she doesn't know how precious her youth is. She just lets it spill.'

'I don't see it. Why does she let it spill?'

'That's the point of it — the spring of life spilling and wasting.'

'Why couldn't she hold the vase upright and not spill the water?'

'It wouldn't have meant anything.'

'Why wouldn't it?'

He went on trying to explain but she could not understand. Neither did she see, as he did, that she herself was like the young girl.

Later, when the old woman came home, a little drunk and talkative, he took out the watch he had begun to clean the previous evening and laid out the works on a sheet of newspaper.

'I saw Ada with a bloke,' said the old woman. 'Serves you right; serves you damn well right.'

He said nothing. What did it matter? And he went on cleaning the watch-works, happy in his silence.

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III

On Sunday mornings Ada and the old woman did not wake till twelve o'clock, and when they at last got up they shuffled from one room to the other, half-dressed, their hair frowzy and uncombed, the old woman's uncorseted body rolling from side to side grossly and flabbily as she searched for the hairpins her shaking fingers let fall in trying to pin up her hair. She always over-drunk on Saturday nights and in the morning her drink-sodden face and her bleary leaden eyes were full of a sombre hatred for the world and for Christopher especially. Ada, without her rouge and powder, but with the remnants of both still on her cracked lips and sallow skin, lay huddled under the bed-clothes, half-asleep and muttering while Christopher and Phoebe got breakfast and sent the two children off at ten o'clock to a Salvation Army Sunday School at the end of the street.

The children always went into the bedroom to say 'Good morning' to the old woman before departing. It was her wish. And they would lean over the gross mound of flesh in the untidy bed and bid her 'Good-bye' and she would stir from her heavy-eyed stupor and say with a kind of bleary sanctimoniousness:

'Gawd bless you. Be good children, sing nicely. That's right! Gawd bless you, my dears, Gawd bless you!'

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Christopher woke early. The first thing he remembered was that Ada, somewhere in the middle of the night, had crawled over him as he lay in bed and had sunk down with an exhausted sigh into her place against the wall. It must have been two o'clock. Her coming not only woke him but set the bed-springs creaking with little sounds which sounded to him louder and more horrible than ever in the dead of night. By her clumsy movements and her grim and uncertain mutterings he realized that she too must be drunk. Sickened, he felt that another night in the same bed with her would drive him mad. Then he remembered Phoebe. He suddenly got out of bed and put on his jacket over his night-shirt. Everywhere was silent and he walked about the room in his bare feet and then he put on his stockings. Again and again he thought of the morning; he saw the train hissing on the platform at King's Cross and he saw it rushing northward through the flat country of eastern England. The thought of it all made him feel wretched and lonely, and suddenly he knelt down impulsively against the big leather arm-chair in the corner and prayed silently with his hands drawn over his face until he had exhausted his words and he could go on praying only through sheer desperation and unhappiness, his words no longer meaning anything. When he rose from his knees he felt chastened and his mind was clearer and he took off his stockings again, intending to get back into bed and try to sleep once

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more, but suddenly he found himself opening the door of the other room, where Phoebe and the children and the old woman slept. He opened the door impulsively by doing it with a kind of defiance against himself. In the bedroom the green blinds were drawn and it was pitch dark, but he knew the room so well he walked straight to the bed where Phoebe was asleep with the two children. The air was heavy with the silence of sleep. Phoebe, a dark image against the pillow, was sleeping on the edge of the bed and the children were huddled against the wall. All the beds in the Bonners' two rooms were pushed against the wall. Christopher stood and listened a moment and then impulsively he stooped and kissed the girl. Except for their warmth her lips might have been dead; there was no response from them. He took one look at her pale face, hesitated and then left the room himself. He walked about the other room for a long time, the thought of getting back into the bed which he hated so much bringing all his unbalancedness back again. When he crept back into bed again he was shivering and his feet were icily cold. He could not get them warm again and they were still cold when he woke.

He woke at ten minutes past seven. The morning was cloudy, with a sickly yellow sunrise which was reflected in the windows, all with blinds still drawn, in the houses opposite. He put on the hands of the clock to half past seven and set the kettle to boil on

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the gas-ring and washed himself at the sink. As he was washing he heard Phoebe moving about and then the children. The youngest child came out to fetch a jug of water for washing.

'Don't make a noise,' he entreated her as he gave her the water.

The train departed at half-past ten. He had put on the hands of the clock by twenty minutes in order to send away the children early. Phoebe would take the children downstairs, wait for him and he would follow.

Phoebe came out of the bedroom with the children, and they all sat down to the breakfast table. The children chattered, but Phoebe and Christopher hardly spoke. Ada stirred uneasily in bed in the corner, fighting wakefulness.

At ten o'clock it all happened as they proposed it should. At the back of his mind Christopher cherished a weak hope that something unexpected would happen to prevent it all, but event followed event implacably and smoothly: Ada did not wake, the children asked no questions, and as the clocks were striking a quarter to ten over London he and Phoebe walked away from Pope's Buildings, meeting no one in the silent streets except milkmen and Sunday-paper men and children running to Sunday School. The streets of Clerkenwell were dim and frowzy and littered with orange peel and fried fish papers which floated sleepily along the pavements, the jaded relics

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of humanity's Saturday night. The time seemed to pass quickly, seeming to record itself not in hours and minutes but in streets and houses, every street and every house exactly like its neighbour, drab and soulless; in the houses, which were the minutes, dwelt crowded people, which were seconds; the seconds were part of the minute and the minute part of the hour, and the hour merely a fraction of time and eternity.

Before Christopher was aware of it, and while he was still thinking gloomily of the streets, they arrived at King's Cross. Life was beginning to move there, and in the station with people hurrying and waiting on the platforms, and trains waiting to depart, he felt less depressed. There was some meaning in life again; people were going away; people were setting out on adventurous journeys; there was a sense of freedom and escape.

He looked up the train on the indicator. 'Platform four.' He looked at Phoebe and smiled. 'You wait at the barrier while I get your ticket,' he told her.

'Here, let me give you the money,' she called.

'No, no! That's all right. Really, that's all right.'

Running to the booking-office he made himself short of breath and he was panting hard and his heart was beating with wild thumps as he asked for the ticket. This was his moment and his triumph. He put down the money, snatched the ticket from the pigeon-hole and ran off again.

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'Now here's your ticket,' he said. 'You have it and I'll get myself a platform ticket.'

They entered the platform a minute later. His depressing thoughts had vanished and he felt joyfully defiant and triumphant. Then suddenly he glanced at Phoebe. Great white tears, like stormy raindrops, were running down her cheeks. He wanted to say something but all that he had wanted to say to her for the last two days surged up in him, and the words became confused, keeping him silent. She took out her handkerchief and blew her nose in order to cover up her wretchedness. He wrenched open a carriage door and she got in and he settled her bag on the rack for her.

He got out of the carriage and shut the door. They looked at each other in silence, she with the tears still glistening on her cheeks and lashes.

At the end of the train a whistle shrieked and unexpectedly the girl spoke quietly.

'I understand about the girl with the pitcher,' she said. He saw that she was crying again. 'You know — the girl all undressed, with the pitcher. I know what you were trying to tell me.' Another whistle blew and there was a flash of green.

What had he tried to tell her? He tried desperately to remember. She was weeping freely, when he said, 'What do you mean?' She only shook her head wretchedly, too full to speak, and a moment later the train began to move and he simply stood still, without

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a word of farewell, feeling too stupefied and unhappy even to wave his hand.

He left the station and went out into the streets. What had he tried to tell her? His head began to feel heavy and the cog-wheel began to rasp slightly but implacably against the edge of his brain. He tried to think clearly and intelligently, but his mind would not respond, and time began to manifest itself again in streets which were hours and houses which were minutes, and people like himself which were the merest fractions in time and eternity.

He walked back to Pope's Buildings, intending to find 'La Source' and look at it again and recall his own words about it.

A group of children were playing in the courtyard, four little girls swinging from a rope tied to a lamp-post, singing a song he remembered singing himself as a child:

'Sally go round the moon
Sally go round the stars.'

He crossed the courtyard as they raised their voices and swung more joyfully to the rest of the song:

'Sally go round the chimney pot
On a Sunday afternoon.'

Suddenly something, he did not know what, made him stop. Why should he go up? Why should he ever go back? Why should he spend another night in that

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awful bed beside which he could not pray and in which he had been so unhappy?

He turned and walked out of the courtyard, the children's voices following him, the sound of their song diminishing as his resolution strengthened.

'Sally go round the moon,' they sang, fainter and fainter.

He began to walk more quickly, never looking behind, walking as though he did not care where he went or how or why.

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THE two men, with their grey, weather-blistered motor-van, arrived at the wood towards the end of August. There had been no rain for many weeks. The wood had been cleared the previous spring, to the last sapling, and where the sawmill had stood a dozen high yellowish pyramids of sawdust were dotted among the disused wooden workmen's shacks, the piles of empty petrol cans and the odds and ends of rusting machinery that the timber company had never fetched away. The riding, once a quiet and shady cantering ground for horses, had been ploughed by the wheels of lumber-carriages and tractors from end to end, and the summer had baked the slush of April to iron. In places the furrows had been filled with hazel-faggots, cut green in spring and thrown down in the ruts of slush, where they had become crushed and withered to tinder. The men drove their motor-van as far as the piles of sawdust and left it there. It was impossible to go further. As far as they could see the big wood was like a battle-field, a desolation of fallen tree-tops lying splintered and interlocked impassably with each other, with clumps of willow-herb and seeded fox glove struggling up between, pink and brown, on long weak stems. The wood-earth was cracked and burned grey by drought, the leaves on the skeleton tops of the felled oak trees

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brown and brittle as scorched paper, the primrose-clumps dotted among the dead timber like rosettes of yellow rag.

The men were brothers. They were each dressed in shirts of oily blue check, with black trousers and black knotted neck mufflers. But except for this they might have been strangers, they were so unlike each other. The elder, Marko, was a big man, about thirty-five, six feet tall, horse-limbed but sluggish of movement, with thick black curly hair that straightened itself over his low forehead; there was power and defiance in the way he shot out his spittle or put his little finger to his black-haired ear and screwed it savagely, a primitive power, at once aggressive and unconscious. He spoke frequently with a kind of sneering annoyance, and never without some growl or murmur of malevolence, as though nothing in the world were right for him. He seemed to live in a state of unnecessary aggression towards his brother, a mere youth, thin and slight, with black eyes that were weak and a little shifty, and a restless fervour about his movements and his pallid face. 'I don' wanna be here all my bloody life if you do!' he would say a dozen times a day, as though blaming the younger man for the drought, the heat, the chaos of the wood, for everything. The younger man took it all with a kind of fearful serenity, in silence, without even a look of protest or a spit of defiance.

'Never get the bloody wood ready the rate you're

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going on, never see the money back. Shift your bloody self.'

They had come to clear the timber that was left. They were half-gipsies, dealers in old-iron, rags, horses, firewood, anything to be picked up cheap and sold for quick profit. And Marko had made a bargain with the manager of the timber company, whereby for next to nothing they might have as much wood as they could clear and saw in a month. In October they would set off, in the motor-van, and run from town to town and sell the logs. There was money in it. It all depended on how hard they worked, how much wood they sawed before October. After that it was easy. Now, while the wood was dry, and the days still long, they must slave like madmen, hardly stopping to eat.

At first they brought the wood to the van, spending one day dragging out the tree boughs with ropes and the next sawing them with a cross-cut saw. The first days of rope and saw blistered their hands and the blisters split with a salty pain, leaving raw spots that would not heal. The saw-handle became like hot iron and the spray of sawdust intolerably parching. The dust seemed to get down to the lungs of the younger man, setting him coughing in dry raking fits which exhausted him but which had no effect on the insistence of his brother's perpetual torment. Were they going to saw the blasted wood or weren't they? Either they'd got to do better than this or jack up. No good going on

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like it. If one could do it the other could. Half a minute? — Christ! nothing but half a minute. How many more half minutes? He would squat there in a derisive attitude of waiting, spitting rankly on his hands, the very sweat on his dark face expressive of his coarse strength, while the young man licked his dust-dry lips and tried to conceal or lessen his desperate panting for breath, his face pale with pain, his hands resting on his knees, white and strengthless, until at last the elder man, impatient of it, would mutter his black snarl and seize the saw-handle and pull it in motion, his brother's hand mechanically catching at it and pulling also, falling into the old automatic motion stupidly.

At the end of the fourth day Joe, the younger man, had an idea. It was he who drove the motor-van, and in the evenings, as he tinkered with the engine, cleaning the plugs, trying to correct some tapping in the engine, he seemed to shake off the weariness of the day and come to life.

He was alone when he had the idea that they might run a circular saw off the back wheel of the van. His brother had gone off into the wood on the prowl. There were no longer any keepers, but the life of the wood remained — foxes taking refuge in the impassable ruin of boughs, an odd pheasant, a wood-pigeon roosting in a surviving hazel-clump, a swarm of rabbits. Very often the men heard the high squeal of the stoat-bitten rabbit and could, by running towards the sound,

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scare the stoat and find the rabbit before the blood-sucking had begun. If there were no rabbit by evening, Marko prowled round, lingering till darkness very often for the chance of a roosting pheasant, while Joe tinkered with the motor engine and replenished the cooking-fire. They had their last meal in the dusk, by the fire, and then slept in the van.

Across the road from the wood stood a solitary house, new-looking, of bright red brick, occupied by a thin stooping man who limped across to the wood to watch the two men sawing and to talk with them. He was an ex-soldier and limped from a wound in the leg and from time to time he would roll up his trousers and display the wound-scar, recounting the story. But the two brothers were unimpressed. They dragged in boughs, sawed them and added to the dry yellow stack of billets as though he did not exist. Only in this did they resemble each other, in their derision, unconscious and unspoken, of the outsider. They could convey that derision in a spit which left behind it a scornful silence, but derision and spit and scorn were all lost on the thin man, who would go on talking to them in a Cockneyish voice of whining familiarity, sucking at a cigarette and between the sentences, oblivious.

'Daresay you wouldn't believe it. But there's a bullet in my leg yet. You can't see it now. It seems to disappear in dry weather and then show again when it rains. Soon as it rains again I'll show it you. See? This leg's like a weather-glass. The bullet begins to

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show when there's rain about. What do you think of that?"

They would make no answer: only the silence or spit of contempt. But once the elder brother remarked: 'You can give us the tip when it's going to rain, then, eh?' and thereafter the man came across the road each evening, smoking the perpetual stained fag-end, and turned up his trousers. There was never a sign of the bullet and the parching heat continued, the leaves of the remaining hazels curling and shrivelling, the thistles and willow-herb making a transparent silken storm of seed which floated over the scorched wood, never ceasing, in the blazing sunshine.

The man appeared, as usual, limping up the riding by the sawdust heaps, as the younger man sat by the van pondering over the new idea of the circular saw, working out the mechanics of it in his mind, deriding himself gently for not having thought of it sooner.

Hearing the footsteps, he glanced up. For the first time he was glad to see the limping man. He could hardly close his fingers for the pain of the broken blisters made by the rope and the cross-saw.

Seeing him by the van, pondering, as if in dejection, the man began: 'Look as if you've lost something. . . .'

But Joe interrupted quickly: 'D'ye know anybody what's got a circular saw? To sell or hire, don't matter. We can pay. I've been thinking how we could run one off the motor.'

'Circular saw?' the man repeated. 'I've got a circular

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saw myself. The timber chaps left it — they used to draw water from my well and they sort of left the saw —' he seemed to become embarrassed, the tentative note in his voice an excuse in itself. 'It wants fitting up, that's all. It's a good saw.'

'D'ye want to sell it? Can I have a look at it?'

'Yes, you can look at it.'

'Now?'

'Now if you like—it's across at my place, in a shed.'

The gipsy began to walk away eagerly, the ex-soldier limping after him, and ten minutes later they returned, with the gipsy carrying the circular saw wrapped up in sacks.

'Then if you can fit it up,' the limping man was saying, 'you'll borrow it and let me have enough wood for winter for the hire of it. That's it, is it?'

'Ah,' said the gipsy, absently. He was gazing at the sun-baked ground, lost in thought.

'You'll want a running belt,' said the man.

The gipsy was down on his knees, gazing beneath the van. Intent on the saw and the motor, he was transformed, his actions full of a fervent vitality, his mind entranced by its new idea, the limping man forgotten.

'All right, all right,' he said once, looking up and seeing him still there, 'we can fix it.' When he looked up again the man was limping away by the heaps of sawdust.

By noon the following day he had fixed up the saw,

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the first high mournful whanging moan of the steel in the wood making strange reverberations among the dead trees. The weather was still unchanged, cloudless and oppressive, the heat striking back intolerably from the shadeless earth and the scattered sawdust. He had worked at the saw since daylight, moving the van to more level ground, jacking up the axle, worried alternately by the difficulties of the problem and by the attitude of his brother, who by spits and monosyllables and half-spoken words conveyed his contempt for the scheme, halting each time he made a journey from the wood with his load of boughs or logs, which he roped together and dragged behind him. Yet he never openly opposed the scheme; he offered no argument against it, only the half-glimpse or half-word of ridicule, softly bitter and provoking.

And strangely enough, at noon, when the saw was finished and whining in motion, he accepted it. Yet the old deprecating infuriating half-murmur of contempt was still there.

'Just about hangs together, don't it? Might do. Might try it.'

He looked it over, feeling the vibration of the saw on the wooden framework, watching the driving-belt. The younger brother, worried at first by the problem of the belt and the saw-frame, had searched among the odds and ends of machinery by the workmen's huts and had found the old saw-frame and some lengths of broken belt which he had riveted together. And now

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he was so proud of the work which had sweated him into a state of weariness that as before the derision of his brother was lost on him. His idea had been conceived, the work done. Nothing else seemed to matter.

Tired, he switched off the engine, the saw sighed to stillness, and he turned to look in the van for something to eat. But the voice of Marko arrested him:

'Ah, what yer switching off for? Go on, switch it on again. I want to try it.'

Joe, leaning across the driving wheel, obediently started up the engine again. A moment later, with a loaf in his hands, he heard the whanging moan of saw cutting into wood. Sitting down on the earth, he watched his brother testing the saw with log after log while he himself ate the bread with lumps of cold bacon.

When he had finished eating he got up, ready to take his brother's place. But the chance did not come. Deliberate, arrogant, Marko never moved from the saw. He fed it with a kind of contemptuous zest, as though ridiculing it, yet keeping the young man from working it. At his feet the pile of sawn yellowish logs was growing quickly. He held the wood to the saw with immense strength, never pausing or relaxing, as implacable and powerful as the saw itself.

Soon, too, the heap of uncut boughs began to dwindle. The younger man sidled about, watching the saw, the motor, and his brother by turns, ill at ease,

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fidgeting, eager for his turn at the saw. But Marko never relaxed.

Finally came a sudden shout above the clatter and whine of the saw and the motor:

‘Get some bloody wood along, can’t you? — go on, quick! Go on!’

The brother hesitated, half-stubborn, half-afraid, and Marko raised the billet in his hand as if to hurl it.

‘Want me to knock your bleeding head off?’

There was a moment’s pause, like a flicker of defiance, but in another moment the boy was walking towards the wood with the rope in his hands.

The whine of the saw continued all afternoon, with melancholy echoes. The ex-soldier limped across the road to watch and smoke the eternal fag-end and offer approval: ‘That’s better beer, eh?’ while Marko fed the saw with the boughs that Joe dragged in from the wood. The heap of billets and the pale pyramid of sawdust grew wonderfully.

It was the same on the following day, and all through the next. The saw ran unceasingly, Marko working it, Joe dragging in the boughs, the ex-soldier looking on, the piles of billets and dust growing rapidly. For ten minutes, on the second day, the saw broke down and Joe hurried down the riding, dragging the faggot of boughs, to put it right. Then the racket and whine went on again, breaking harshly the strange stillness that had come down over the wood in the pause. The still sunshine and the drought continued also. ‘The

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old bullet'll die of thirst if this keeps on,' said the ex-soldier, but the brothers offered no remark. They scarcely spoke, now, to each other. When the saw had been repaired Marko offered not a single word of approval or satisfaction; and Joe said nothing. He walked back to the wood with the rope in silence, as if he no longer cared.

The following evening, the third of working the new saw, a cart and pony drove unexpectedly down the road and up the riding, swaying and pitching over the sun-baked wheel-ruts, halting just beyond the motor-van before the men were aware of it, the sound of its coming drowned under the rattle and moan of the saw.

In the cart was a woman, black-haired, youngish, hatless, with a white shawl crossed gipsy-fashion over her pink blouse.

She stood up in the cart and throwing the reins on the horse's back shouted at the men. The racket of the saw drowned her voice so that they did not hear.

'Hey-up! Hey-up!' she called again.

It was the boy who heard and noticed her first.

'Marko, Marko,' he said quickly. 'It's the wife.'

He went to the van to shut off the engine, Marko threw down the billet he had sawn, and together they walked towards the cart. The woman was climbing down from the cart.

'Ye never told us,' muttered Marko.

'How could I tell you?' she flashed. 'How was I to let you know? I been all over the damn place.'

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'All right, all right,' he muttered. 'You're here now.'

The flash of antagonism, their only greeting, died down quickly again. They exchanged another word or two, of commonplace things, the younger brother throwing in an odd remark, and then the woman began to unharness the pony and the men went back to the saw, as though nothing had happened.

The men worked on in the warm evening, the woman busy about the fire, watching them, sometimes, with her hands on her hips, her strong, big-boned face shrewd even in its preoccupation, her eyes alert even in their immobility, the trembling ear-rings under the thick black loops of hair giving her a flashy air, half-beautiful. At first she was too occupied to notice much, to see anything more than Marko at the saw and Joe dragging the loads of boughs down the riding. There was nothing significant in that, but she wondered idly once or twice about the saw, wondering where they had picked it up, how they had made it work, and she was faintly astonished at the stack of billets.

But suddenly, standing idle, she sensed it all in a flash. Coming in once from the wood Joe threw down the rope and put one hand to his mouth and licked the palm, slowly and luxuriously, so that she saw instantly the pain and relief in his face. And in a moment she half-divined that the idea of the saw was his. He alone had the machine-sense. Marko could never have done it. A second later, still not quite sure, she walked across to Marko, watching him, to ask carelessly:

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'Whose idea was it — the saw?'

'Joe's,' said Marko. 'He fixed it up.' His voice was flat, expressionless.

She said no more. But in the evening, when the saw was silent and they sat round the fire, eating, she looked at Joe's hands and saw the great crimson blisters, kept raw by the rope and boughs, that would not heal.

'What's the matter with your hands?' she said.

'What's up with his hands?' mocked Marko. 'What's up with them?'

Joe curled up his hands and would not show them and was silent.

But Marko extended his palms, with a sort of aggressive contempt. They also were scarred with red skinless patches.

'Poor Marko's hands,' he muttered.

The derision was directed through her to the boy. She tried to neutralize it at once by a flash in return.

'Yes, yes,' she said bitterly. 'Poor Marko's hands. Poor Marko.'

Joe said nothing. He had heard them quarrel often enough. And the derision he accepted with meekness, too weak to sustain even the thought of anger and retaliation.

In the morning the woman spoke to Joe, alone.

'Why don't you work the saw?'

'Marko works it.'

'I never asked you that. I said why don't you work it?'

'I don't know.'

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'Don't you want to work it then?'

'I don't care.'

She gave it up, shrugging her shoulders:

'Well, you know best.'

But all through the morning, as she peeled potatoes and cooked and washed out the men's oily blue-check shirts, she kept an eye on him. It was necessary, now, for Joe to go farther and farther back into the wood for timber, so that the journeys were longer and the saw often ate through one load of boughs long before another arrived. It meant that the saw must run empty or be shut off, and that Marko must wait empty-handed, furious. When the boy arrived at last the hot spit of that fury met him.

'Why the hell don' you shift yourself! I don' wanna be here all winter! Shift yourself!'

And never a word or gesture of retaliation from the boy. She marvelled at his silence and filled each time with anger and disgust.

In the afternoon, after his first journey into the wood, she said carelessly:

'I'll give a hand with that wood.'

She followed Joe up the riding and into the wood, through the ruin of dead boughs and withered thistle-stalks and white-feathered willow-herb, along the path his constant journeys had made through the parched undergrowth. They gathered a load of oak boughs together, not speaking much, and Joe dragged it out of the wood while she prepared another load.

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Expectantly, she listened to Marko's voice, and a little later she heard it, deriding the boy, with half-direct, taunting words, because he had allowed her to help him.

She was furious now also.

'I should think you're going to stand that, I should think so,' she said when Joe returned.

'It's all right,' he said.

'All right, all right,' she whispered bitterly. 'All right when he talks to you like that? Your own brother? I should think so.'

'I'm used to it.'

'Used to it! Used to it!' she half raised her hands. 'He don't talk to me like it, I see. You're hopeless.'

But she would not let him rest. Whenever they were alone together she urged him to retaliate, to show his spirit, to defy Marko. 'I can see myself letting him say the things he says to you, I'm sure. Do something, boy. Do something.' And she would argue, rationally, too.

'Didn't you fit the saw up? Wasn't it your idea? You're his brother ain't you? You're as good as he is? If it hadn't been for you we shouldn't have been nowhere. Nowhere. Ah! I tell you boy, I tell you, you're a fool, you're a fool!'

She kept on in this way all afternoon, lugging savagely at the boughs as she spoke and so giving a strange compulsion and strength to her words. At last he began to take notice, half-agreeing, half-seeing the reason of her words, and catching as it were the

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reflected fire of her passionate indignation. He'd half a mind to do something. He could see now. He'd half a mind . . .

'That's it, do something. Show him you don't stand that.'

But he did nothing. He would work himself up, nervously, tensely, in order to offer a word or a gesture of defiance to his brother, but the act itself was too much for him.

'I'll do it—just give me a chance, that's all. I'll do it.'

Half-detesting, half-pitying his weakness, she continued to work him up, a sense of right impelling her at first, then a curious illogical, fitful desire to witness a crisis between them. Her own passion for Marko was dried up. She no longer cared, neither one way or another. She satisfied something in herself as she whipped the boy into a state of vengeance.

'Go on. The longer you let it go on the longer it will.'

By the evening he had worked himself into a strange state of revengeful anger, an agitation that had about it also the trembling terror of cowardice. He'd do something, he'd do something all right, he'd do something. She was a little afraid. Where he had been too weak to urge himself to anger he was likewise too weak to sustain the sudden fury she had whipped up in him. His white sweaty face was burnt up with fatigue and anger, his hands were quivering, he did not know what to do with the fury that had leapt up, volatile and terrible, within him.

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She calmed him down a little:

'Don't get excited. He'll notice. Wait till he gives you the chance. Calm down a bit.' Her voice, touched with pity, soothed him.

In the evening, as they sat about the fire, eating, the ex-soldier limped over the road and up the riding, to talk with them.

'The old bullet's showed up,' he told them. 'Might be a storm.' He rolled up his trousers and showed his thin, pallid hairy leg, with the faint bluish shadow of what might have been the bullet under the flesh.

'Clear the air,' said Marko.

The woman looked at him quickly as he spoke. He was half-glancing at his brother, significantly, darkly. She wondered if he suspected. But the boy, staring at the ground, brooding with his own anger, had noticed nothing.

The ex-soldier limped home early. The bullet hurt him very much, and the sky, filling with darkish oppressive heat-clouds, seemed to promise the storm too. The air was still and tense.

'It'll blow over,' said the woman, trying to speak casually.

'I ain't so sure,' said Marko. 'I'll have a look at the nag anyway.'

He rose abruptly and began to walk away, towards the road, where they had tethered the nag on the parched road-grass. Instantly, as he turned his back, the boy leapt up behind him, silent, wild with passion,

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with a long billet in his hand. Before the woman could speak, he took one step forward, raising his arm, and stood poised as if to bring down the billet madly, with all his force on the head of his brother. His arm actually lowered. His face was watery with sweat and white in its fury. He became for one moment filled with the diabolical strength of pure cowardice.

And suddenly it left him. His arm dropped, his body seemed to go cold with weakness, and in a second or two his brother was down the riding, out of reach.

The woman, afraid, angry, began to whisper furiously:

'God, what d'ye think you're doing. What made you do that? God, he'd smash you! He'd smash you!'

He took no notice.

'I shall do it, I shall do it,' he said, tensely.

'You're a fool!' she cried. She was afraid; she no longer pitied him. 'Ah! you're a fool. He'll smash you, I tell you, he'll smash you.'

'Leave me alone!' the boy cried. 'Leave me alone, I tell you!'

He began to walk away, still clenching the billet, the force of his fury and hatred flowing back through his weak body again, inflaming his white face and eyes with its frenzy. As he retreated towards the wood she threw up her arms with a gesture of fatalistic abandonment:

'Well, you do it!' she whispered. 'You do it. I'm finished. You do it. I ain't responsible. I'm finished.'

DEATH OF UNCLE SILAS

WHEN I heard that my great-uncle Silas was dying I did not believe it. He was so old that it had always been hard for me to realize that he had ever been born. It had always seemed to me that he had simply turned up, very old and imperishable, with his crimson neckerchief and his bloodshot eye as bright as the neckerchief, his earth-coloured breeches, his winey breath, and that huskily devilish voice that had told me so many stories and had left as many tantalizingly half-told. Yet I remember how he would often tell me that he could recollect — the word was his own — standing on a corn-sheaf, in his frocks, and sucking at the breast his mother slipped out of her dress and held down for him in the harvest-field. ‘They had the titty, them days, till they were damn near big enough to reap and tie.’ Though he might very well have made it up. ‘I was allus tidy thirsty,’ he would say at the end of that story, or in fact at the end of any story. ‘Mouthful o’ wine?’ he would say. It was his favourite phrase.

It was early autumn, in the middle of harvest, when I heard that he was dying. If it had been winter, or even spring, I might have believed it. But in autumn, and at harvest, it was unthinkable, absurd. His late peas would be coming into pod: for seventy years he had reckoned on them, without fail, for a last blow-out,

with a goose and a dish of apple-sauce made from his own first cookers, on Michaelmas Sunday. Who would pick the peas and gather the apples and lard the goose if he were to die? His potatoes would be dead ripe, the pears would be dropping into the golden orchard as mellow as honey, the elderberries would be drooping over the garden hedge in grape-dark bunches, ripe for wine. What would happen to them if Silas died? What could happen? No one else could dig those potatoes or garner those pears or work that wine as he did. The very words 'Silas is dying' seemed fantastic. Moreover I had heard them before. Hearing them once, I had hurried over to see him for the last time, only to find him up a ladder, pruning his apple trees with a jack-knife, all of a muck-sweat, with his jacket off, in the winter wind. 'I heard you were dead,' I said. He hawked and spat with a sort of gay ferocity. 'Ever hear the tale of the old gal who heard I was dead and buried, and then *seed* me in "The Swan"? She never touched another drop.'

When the news again came that he was dying I thought of his words. And I did not trouble to go over to see him. In imagination I saw him digging his potatoes in the hot September sun or mowing the half-acre of wheat he grew every other year at the end of the paddock, 'just so as I shan't forget how to swing a scythe'. The wheat kept him in bread, which he baked himself. He sent me a loaf sometimes, its crust as crisp as a wheat-husk and a dark earth-colour, and

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I often went over to help him band and carry the wheat. Even when I heard he was dying I expected every day to hear he had mown the wheat and was ready for me. I took as little notice of the news as that.

But unexpectedly there came other news:

'They say Silas doesn't know what he's doing half the time.'

Not 'Silas is ill', or 'Silas is dying' or even 'Silas is unconscious', but 'Silas doesn't know what he's doing'. The words were ominous, a contradiction of my uncle Silas's whole life, his principles, his character, his amazing cunning, his devilish vitality. They perturbed me, for they could mean so much. They might mean that my uncle Silas had so changed that he now no longer knew beer from water or wheat from beans; that he had dug his potatoes under-ripe or carried his wheat wet or made his wine from green elderberries. If it meant these things then it also meant the end. For what separated my uncle Silas from other men was exactly this. He knew what he was doing. How often had I heard him say with a cock of his bloodshot eye and the most devilish darkness: 'I know what I'm doing, me boyo. I know what I'm doing.'

The day after hearing the news I went over to see him. His little stone reed-thatched house, squatting close under the shelter of the spinney of pines, was visible from afar off. There was always a puff of wood-smoke rising from the chimney, very blue against the

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black pines, winter and summer alike, if my uncle Silas were at home. It was lovely September weather, the air breathless, the sunshine very soft and the pale amber colour of new wheat straw, and I saw the smoke rising up as straight as the pines themselves as I walked up the lane to the house.

It was a good sign. If the smoke were rising my uncle Silas was at home; if he were at home it was a thousand to one, in summer-time, that he was in the paddock or the garden, or if not there, by his chair at the window, his mole-coloured head and his scarlet neckerchief just visible among the very old, sweet-leaved white and mauve geraniums.

But that afternoon he was not in the paddock, where the wheat stood ripe and half-mown, and I could not see him in the garden, where the pears lay wasp-sucked and rotting in the yellowing grass. Walking up the garden-path, with the rank marigolds and untidy chrysanthemum stalks swishing heavily against my legs, I frightened a jay off the pea-rows. I stopped at once. But my uncle Silas did not appear. The jay squawked in the wood. A jay on the pea-rows, and no sign from my uncle Silas! I did not even look for him at the window, among the geraniums.

As I reached the door of the house I heard the clopping of the housekeeper's untied shoes coming along the stone passages to meet me. Before she appeared I stepped over the threshold and looked into the room. The house was the same as ever, with the

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same eternal smell of earth and tea, of wood-smoke and balm, of geranium-leaves and wine. There was even the faint earth-smell of my uncle Silas himself. But his chair was empty.

The housekeeper appeared a moment later, as scrawny and frigid as ever, and more straight-lipped, in the same black skirt and grey shirt-blouse and iron corsets that she seemed to have worn ever since my uncle Silas had first engaged her, bringing with her, as she had done for so many years, that smell of carbolic soap which had so often made him say, 'I do believe you were suckled on soap.' But that afternoon she looked tired, she seemed relieved to see me, and she broke out at once:

'Oh! dear, he'll wear me out.'

There was a sort of melancholy affection for him in her voice, and I knew at once that there must be something wrong.

'Where is he?' I asked.

But before she could reply his own cracked voice called suddenly:

'I'm here, me boyo, in here.'

'Where's that?' I called.

'In the parlour,' the housekeeper whispered.

'All among the fol-di-dols,' called my uncle Silas. 'Come in.'

As I walked across the passage between the two rooms the housekeeper entreated me in another whisper, 'The doctor says you mustn't tire him.'

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The doctor! My uncle Silas not to be tired! He who could have mown a forty-acre field and not be tired! It was all over, I thought, as I pushed open the parlour-door and went in and met the stale anti-macassar odour of the closed room.

And there, under the window, on an old black couch of American leather, with a green horse-rug over him and his sun-brown arms lying uselessly over the rug, lay my uncle Silas. By his side was the night-commode and a little bamboo table with two wine-glasses and two bottles of lemon-coloured and blackish medicine on it.

'Now don't go and talk and tire yourself,' said the housekeeper.

'Go and wring yourself out, y'old wet sheet!' he croaked.

'What's that? If you ain't careful I'll pack me bag and leave you lying there. So I'll tell you!'

'Pack it! And good riddance.'

'Ah, and I will!' She flashed off to the door.

It was the old game: she was always leaving and never leaving, my uncle Silas was always dismissing her and always keeping her.

'Look slippy and bring us a bottle o' cowslip,' he said. 'And don't talk so much.'

But she was outside the door, without a word and not heeding him, before he had finished speaking. He lay back on the sofa, gloomily. 'Won't even let me wet me whistle,' he said.

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He lay silent for a moment or two, his eyes watery, his chest heaving a little. 'I puff like an old frog,' he said. I did not answer, and until he regained his breath and his calmness I could not look at him again, and I let my eyes wander over the room instead, over the fol-di-dols he hated so much, the accumulated knick-knacks of nearly a hundred years, the little milky glass vases, rose-painted cups, mahogany tea-caddies, ruby wine-glasses, all the dear pretty things that he despised and never used. To find him there among them was a tragedy itself. He loved living things; and the only living things in that room were ourselves and the afternoon sunlight yellowing the closed window.

'Sit down,' he said at last. His voice so weary that I hardly recognized it. 'Can you find a seat? All the damn chairs in this room are bum-slippy!'

I sat down on one of the black American leather chairs that matched his couch.

'Well,' I said. 'What's the matter with you?'

He shook his head. 'I ain't worth a hatful o' crabs.'

I could hardly bear the words. To hear that he didn't know what he was doing, to see a jay on his pea-rows, to find that he mustn't drink or talk or tire himself and now to hear him say, 'I ain't worth a hatful o' crabs'. My heart sank. It seemed to mean that his spirit was already dead. And no sooner had I thought it than he half-cocked his eye at me with a faint flicker of the old cunning.

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'See that jay on the pea-rows?' he said.

'Yes.'

'Ah. I'll jay him.'

And then, with a sudden satanic flash of his blood-shot eye that surprised and delighted me, he whispered:

'Mouthful o' wine?'

I sat astonished. 'I thought they wouldn't let you drink?' I said.

He winked. 'In the medicine bottles,' he said. 'Elderberry in the dark and cowslip in the light. Pour out. Mouthful o' cowslip for me.'

Smiling, I poured out the wine and he lay smiling back at me with all his old subtlety and wickedness. As I gave him the glass he whispered: 'I fill 'em o' nights when she's a-bed.'

We drank in silence.

'What's the doctor say?' I asked.

'Says another drop o' wine will kill me.'

He finished his wine and wiped out the glass on the horse-blanket before putting it back on the table. The wine twinkled in his eyes and had already flushed away the dead yellow colour of his skin. And suddenly he shot up in bed, craning his tough thick neck to look out of the window:

'That jay again! God damn it, go and get my gun.'

I knew he meant it and I rose at once and went to the door. But he had raised his voice, and the house-keeper had heard him. She was in the room almost before I had moved, with the old despairing cry:

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'Oh! he'll wear me out!'

She seized him sternly, forcing him back on the pillows while he shouted at her:

'You interferin' old tit! I'll shoot that jay if I have to shoot you first!'

'He don't know what he's saying or doin',' she said to me. And then to him, as she straightened his blankets inexorably:

'You'll take your medicine now, jay or no jay, and then get some sleep.'

As she took up the dark medicine bottle and poured out his measure into the wine-glass he kept lolling out his tongue, sick-fashion, and rolling his eyes and complaining, 'It's like drinking harness oil and vinegar, oh! it's like drinking harness oil and vinegar. Ach!'

'Drink it!' She forced the glass into his hands and he crooked his elbow on the pillow, lolling his tongue in and out.

She turned away to draw down the blinds. No sooner was her back turned than he lifted his glass and gave me a swift marvellous look of the wickedest triumph, licking his thick red lips and half-closing his blood-shot eye. The glass was empty and he was lying back on the pillows, smacking his mouth sourly, before she turned her head again.

'I'll come and see you,' I said, with my hand on the door-latch.

'Ah, do. I s'll have the taters out next week and the wheat down. Come and give us a hand.' The faint

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shadow of that wicked and triumphant smile flickered across his face. 'So long, me boyo.'

Outside, in the garden, I asked the housekeeper what was the matter with him.

'It's senile decay,' she said. 'He's losing the use of his legs and half the time he don't know what he's doing. It's just the medicine that keeps him going.' I had no doubt it was.

But one morning, a week later, I heard that he was dying; and in the afternoon I went over to the house. A gentle rain had been falling all morning, a quiet whispering September rain, and the air, very still and sultry, was saturated with the fragrance of wet pines. Crossing the paddock, I noticed that the wheat had been mown and half-banded and that the elderberries had gone from the garden-hedge. In the garden itself there was an intense rain-heavy stillness, unbroken except for the fretful twitter of swallows gathering on the house thatch. Looking across the rank thicket of dahlias and sunflowers beyond the apple-trees I caught a glimpse of a dead blue jay strung on a hazel-stick among the pea-rows, its bright feathers dimmed with rain.

The housekeeper came to meet me at the door, her finger uplifted and her lips pursed tight to silence me.

'How is it with him?' I whispered.

'Bad,' she said. 'Very bad. He won't see to-morrow.'

'Can I see him?'

'He won't know you. He's very strange.'

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Yes, he was very strange. He had begun to turn day into night, she told me: he would doze all day and then, in the dead of night, while she was asleep, he would wake and ferret in the cellar or mow his wheat and dig his potatoes and gather his elderberries for wine. She had suspected nothing until, awakened early one morning by a gun-shot, she had hurried into the garden to find him stringing up a dead jay in his pea-rows. It seemed that sometimes, too, he would drink his medicine in one swig, by the bottleful. He was so far gone as that.

When she had finished speaking I went into the house to look at him: he lay there, as before, on the leather couch, among the fol-di-dols, the green horse-rug over him and his brown hands lying listlessly outside it. He seemed to be asleep: yet there was something half-alert about the expression of his closed eyes, as though he were listening to me or perhaps to the rain. I stood for a moment watching him. And suddenly his eyes half-opened and a gaze that had in it some of the old strength and wickedness rested on me darkly. In a moment his lips moved too.

'What's the weather?' he said.

'It rains,' I said.

'Let it,' he whispered.

It was a flash of the old spirit. In a moment it was gone and his lips closed without another sound, and his eyelids lowered with a sharp flicker that was like a last wink at me.

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I never heard him speak again. When we went in to him again, in the evening, he had turned day into night for the last time. The rain had ceased. The sun had broken through and was shining on the empty medicine bottles and his dead hands.